Horror in Culture & Entertainment

RUE MORGUE™

28TH ANNIVERSARY / HALLOWEEN ISSUE!

THE LOST HORROR FILMS OF LON CHANEY

LONDON AFTER MIDNIGHT
A BLIND BARGAIN
WHILE PARIS SLEEPS

PLUS!

STEVEN SPIELBERG'S
SOMETHING EVIL
POSTHOUSE
AND LOST FILIPINO
HORROR

ISSUE 226 SEPT/OCT 2025 US $14.95 CAN $15.95

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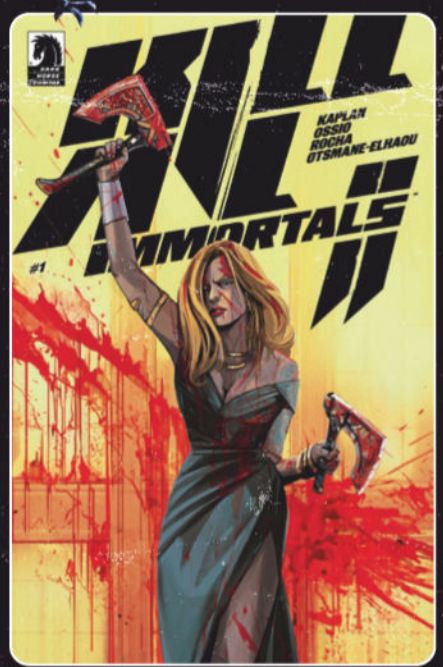

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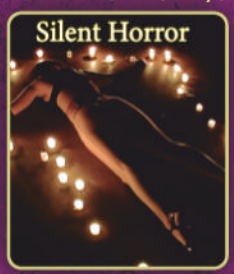

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025 #226

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Rue Morgue unearths some of the genre's lost films, and explores why Tod Browning's *London After Midnight* lingers in our collective imagination.
PLUS! Lon Chaney's *A Blind Bargain* gets a retro-modern reimagining with a dash of Crispin Glover; lost made-for-TV horror movies that terrorized a generation; and the unquiet spirits of the lost Filipino horror films are awakened in Nikolas Red's *Posthouse*.
by **KELLY ROBINSON, ANDREA SUBISSATI, AMANDA REYES AND PAYTON MCCARTY-SIMAS**

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by **VARIOUS**

34 CURSED FILMS, CURSED WORDS

The cursed film – that movie that, when watched, can actually kill you (or worse) – has been whispered about since the dawn of cinema, and is now the basis of a growing literary obsession.
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Photos by **VARIOUS**

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NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

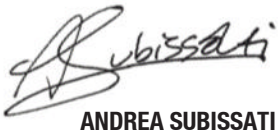
A Halloween special double issue on lost films, you say? How much could there be to say about films that no longer exist? Well, plenty, and I'll let our cover story writers take it from there, but there's so much more to the subject of lost films than the films themselves. We're all familiar with that delightful anticipation that occurs in the moment before you sit down to watch a movie you've been dying to see. Having beheld the poster, the trailer, or the cardboard VHS cover, there's a special sense of promise that goes above and beyond the experience of looking forward to your daily evening cigarette (I'm working on it, okay?). There's that all-important possibility that this might be the *greatest fucking horror movie you've ever seen*, one that might transform you for the rest of your days – you know the kind I'm talking about. And when it comes to lost films, where the art and promotional materials are all we have to speak of… that sense of pregnant possibility is everything, as open-ended as *Game of Thrones* and twice as frustrating. To use the most famous example, reading about a lost horror film that ticks as many boxes as *London After Midnight* does – Tod Browning, check, Lon Chaney, check, a villainous visage etched in our minds in spite of never seeing him in action, checkity-check check – is a lot like edging for cinephiles. So please, do enjoy the tease, just don't expect satisfaction anytime soon.

Anyway, now that I can scratch "reference to edging" off my Note From Underground bingo card, I'd like to share something that recently occurred to me when I was travelling on the subway to a hosting gig in Toronto. I'm a goth chick in her forties with tattooed arms and long, sharp claws, and while I blend in quite seamlessly at a horror convention or an AFI concert, I do tend to stick out in general daytime public. As such, I'm used to being stared at, but I'm occasionally approached by younger women who tell me they love my style. It's both flattering and hilarious to me, because I tend to conceive of "having style" as keeping up with trends, or as knowing what colours to match the season (as opposed to matching black with black). But recently, my complimenter added something to the effect of "I wish I could dress like that," and my immediate response was, "What's stopping you?" She didn't answer – she probably thought the question rhetorical, but I genuinely wanted to know. It's 2025, after all – we've more freedom than ever to express ourselves, and while some identity expression does come with some measure of risk, the reward of feeling true to yourself is *always* worthwhile. The question got me reflecting on my own herstory with self-expression, and that brought me to Halloween.

Not every horror fan savoured the costume aspect of Halloween as kids but, holy shit, I lived for it – especially as I got older and the opportunity to paint my face and wear all black was finally appropriate. As I entered my preteen years, I consistently dressed up as a witch or a bat or a vampire – anything that could validate the black nails and lipstick that made me feel like my true demonic self. But at a certain point, I had to ask myself why I bothered to wait for Halloween if something as simple as wearing black made me feel so good. Why shouldn't I feel this badass every day? What could I achieve if I went through life feeling this unstoppable? What, in other words, was stopping me? The answer, I realized, was nothing, and once those cognitive shackles came off, I stopped wasting money on trendy/colourful garments that I wore only grudgingly to avoid the '90s cliches of the troubled teen. Now I'm 43 and the proud weirdo in her quiet suburban neighbourhood, the witchy tattooed lady with the small dog and the weird statue of a kid in a yellow rain slicker on her lawn. I'm your big titty goth girlfriend of a magazine editor, and all because I gave myself explicit permission to be the darkness I want to see in the world.

And in case you haven't been paying attention, dear reader, the world is on fire. The doomsday clock has blown its springs and, at this point, I wouldn't be surprised if dinosaurs rose from extinction to usher in a new age of life on Earth without the embarrassment of humanity. In this ominous context, and on the eve of our favourite holiday, I challenge you to look at what you love most about life and ask yourself: what's stopping you from enjoying it every day? Whatever it is, let this be your permission to let your freak flag fly, whatever colour it may be.

Happy Halloween!



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Cover: *London After Midnight*
Design by Shane Mills

We acknowledge the land that *Rue Morgue* is created upon is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

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POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM

WHEN I PULLED *RM#225* out and saw a cover story on my all-time favourite rocker, I shrieked in delight. I saw the original band on the Billion Dollar Babies Tour in Baltimore, Maryland. Your feature had great art and Aaron von Lupton's interview was top-notch. All praise! Love the maple leaf on the cover now, too. Not all of us in America are drinking the Kool-Aid.

JONNY ANGEL, FROM THE HALLOWEEN HOUSE

ENJOYED YOUR FEATURE "The Revenge of Alice Cooper." Dear God, Alice Cooper, I believe, is 77 years old and still going strong. Alice is truly a legend and will always carry the title of being the Godfather of Shock Rock! I remember when I was in school and hearing kids say that Alice Cooper was Eddie Haskell. That was one crazy rumour.

PAUL DALE ROBERTS,
THE WAITING ROOM PODCAST

I WAS SO HAPPY to see the mention of *Cannibal Comedian* in the Last Rites section of *RM#225*. Two of the stars are good friends of mine, and I'm so proud of them! Indie films have been more fun than big blockbusters recently, and it's great to see ones like *Cannibal Comedian* getting noticed.

TODD "QUALITY" JAEGER –
PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

I WAS EXTREMELY HAPPY to have my debut comic *Shadowplay: Midnight School* mentioned in *RM#224*. A few years ago, my uncle brought me some magazines here (Brazil) and I was so impressed. I was never able to buy any other physical copies, but I bought some digital issues over the years, here and there. The *Shadowplay* series will be a trilogy, and I am feeling how difficult it is to promote the title in North America while being here in South America. If you have any tips on where I can try to promote this title, which mixes horror, manga influences, and a bit of surrealism, I would love to hear them. Once again, thank you very much! I've already bought a few more digital editions of the magazine (actually, I had a problem with the purchase of one of the digital issues, but the app's customer service resolved it promptly).

SAM FONSECA, VIA EMAIL

JUST WANTED TO let you know that while I enjoy all the cinematic feature articles and monthly columns, I am thoroughly enjoying your features/interviews with genre writers. The recent cover story on Clive Barker was fantastic as well as last month's feature on Chuck Wendig and *RM#225*'s article on Chuck Tingle. As a former horror small press book reviewer for CNN.com, please keep up these writer interviews. They are very much appreciated.

JAMES ARGENDELI, VIA EMAIL

THE BEST WAY to enjoy Summerween is reading the new issue of *Rue Morgue*!

@GRAVESIZZY, VIA INSTAGRAM

IN RESPONSE TO Bryan Christopher's Shadowland column from *RM#223*, regarding the CIA's notorious MKUltra program, I invoke the immortal words of Q Lazzarus: "I say, oh no, sir. I must say you're wrong… I must disagree. Won't you listen to me?" I believe it is entirely possible that the CIA did achieve some extraordinary success in mind control. The book *Chaos: Charles Manson, the CIA, and the Secret History of the Sixties* by Tom O'Neill lays out some startling evidence although, of course, no smoking gun (pun intended). Oh, and there's also a Netflix documentary based on the book called *Chaos: The Manson Murders* that came out this year, although the book is better. Check 'em out, and keep an open (hopefully uncontrolled) mind!

JOSEPH WATERS – RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

LOOK MA! I made it in the magazines! I am in this edition of @ruemorguemag courtesy of @officialfaceofhorror. What an incredible experience and look at me… it's like I'm a professional ghostbuster or something. Fun fact: I have the flight suit in my closet.

@THARYN_BEYONDTHEVEIL, VIA INSTAGRAM

WELL DONE giving Adam Lopez some love in this issue's editor letter. Huge loss for the Toronto film community. His enthusiasm for genre films was second to none. He will be sorely missed by all his cinemaniacs, myself being one.

@SINISTERVIBEPRODUCTIONS, VIA INSTAGRAM

CORRECTION: *In our coverage of* Spectral Lights *("Ghostly Grandmasters" in* RM#225*), the black-and-white illustrations on pages 20, 21, and 22 were incorrectly credited; the artist is Aleksandra Dević.* Rue Morgue *regrets the error.*

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CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE # 226

The first known parking restrictions existed in Assyria circa 700 BC, where the fine was death and impalement outside one's home.

During the filming of 1975's *Shivers*, David Cronenberg was accidentally stabbed in the leg by Lynn Lowry with the cooking fork she carries in a scene. He still has the scar.

After starlet Jayne Mansfield died from head injuries suffered by rear-ending a tractor trailer, Highway Safety mandated that all trucks have a rear under-ride guard installed, now referred to in the industry as a "Mansfield bar."

Ginger Snaps stars Katharine Isabelle and Emily Perkins were both born in the same hospital, went to the same schools, and worked for the same agency.

Cucurbitophobia is described as a fear of pumpkins.

David Fincher's *Se7en* was the seventh highest grossing movie of 1995.

An alleged Persian method of execution called Scaphism saw the condemned force-fed milk and honey and placed in a swamp to be eaten alive by insects and vermin, leading to a prolonged, agonizing death from infection, exposure, and decay.

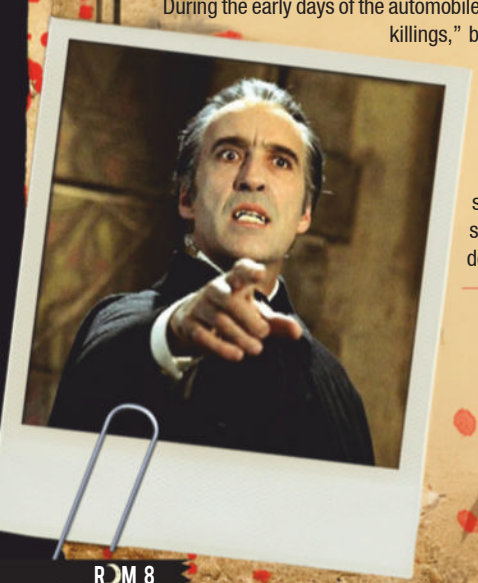
The original script of the 1986 version of *Little Shop of Horrors* had the giant plant eat both Audrey and Seymour, but director Frank Oz changed it after negative reactions from test audiences.

The Vampyroteuthis infernalis (loose translation: "vampire squid from hell") is so named for its dark colour and batwing-style webbing.

The "Iron City" beer logo seen in both *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and the 1990 *Night of the Living Dead* remake is for an actual company, one that George A. Romero produced a commercial for early in his career.

Mosquitoes kill approximately 725,000 people a year: almost double the deaths caused by other humans via homicide.

During the early days of the automobile, pedestrian fatalities were called "motor killings," but as the industry grew, car companies invented the term "jaywalking" to shift blame from the driver to the victim.



The 1972 film *Dracula A.D. 1972* was inspired by the early '70s media sensation dubbed the Highgate Vampire, a supernatural entity said to reside in London's Highgate Cemetery.

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE
GOT A WEIRD STAT OR MORBID FACT?
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EXPIRING MINDS...

ON RUE MORGUE'S SOCIAL MEDIA

What horror movie would be better off lost and why?

It, because it sidetracked the careers of many honest, hardworking birthday party clowns.

JAY LEE, VIA FACEBOOK

My parents' sex tape.

@PAGAN_MAMMOTH, VIA INSTAGRAM

Guinea Pig 2: Flower of Flesh and Blood. There's no narrative, just a woman being methodically tortured to death for sport. It's not so much the gore that bothers me, it's the content and tone. I don't think the creator who came up with the idea likes women very much, either.

HORROR BOOM, VIA FACEBOOK

Secret Window is a breath of hot garbage in July.

WENDY D. HOOVING, VIA FACEBOOK

None, they all deserve to be preserved.

SEBASTIEN TURGEON, VIA FACEBOOK

FINAL WORDS

AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

"EVERYONE ASKS, 'WHERE'S THE ALIEN?' BUT NO ONE ASKS, 'HOW'S THE ALIEN?'"

THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CONTEST WINNER IS
TYLER FLETCHER, VIA FACEBOOK
Follow us on Facebook, Bluesky, and Instagram for a chance to have your Final Words!

AUTOPSY
CASE NO. 1269351

ONTARIO BLACK BEAR ATTACK

Animal attacks are a fairly common occurrence in the Shadowland; hungry sharks and homicidal lions have all left their mark on the horror genre, so it was just a matter of time before they were joined by a nice fluffy bear. Before we had movies about bears doing blow, we had Adam MacDonald's harrowing 2014 film *Backcountry*, where hapless hikers Jenn (Missy Peregrym) and Alex (Jeff Roop) get lost in the woods and are targeted by a predatory black bear. MacDonald adds surprising layers to the true story via explorations of toxic masculinity, elevating it above most standard creature feature fare, but what makes the film's real-life inspiration so tragic is that, unlike poor Alex, you can do everything right and have things still go horribly wrong.

Canadian couple Mark Jordan and Jacqueline Perry were on a two-week vacation in September of 2005, kayaking and camping in the woods about 50 miles north of Chapleau in Ontario. While their cinematic counterparts navigated a series of mishaps and bad decisions on Alex's part leading up to the attack, by all accounts Jordan and Perry's trip had been going according to plan. One evening they were preparing dinner when a bear, not fully grown and likely to have been starving and desperate for food, attacked the camp and went after Perry, dragging her into nearby bushes. Jordan attempted to fend it off, grappling it in a headlock and stabbing at it with a Swiss Army Knife, but the animal continued its attack and severely injured both campers.

By the time Jordan was able to pull Perry into their canoe and travel over half a mile to a nearby campsite to get help, Perry had died from blood loss while Jordan required 300 stitches to repair his wounds. Their ordeal was a freak occurrence, being only the fifth black bear fatality in Ontario since 1978. Jordan admitted that had he known the bear was starving, he would have tried harder to kill it as opposed to scaring it off enough for the couple to get away, but he'd done everything he could. He was even awarded the Star of Courage in 2007 for his brave efforts to save his wife.

MacDonald's film made a few changes to the story, but *Backcountry*'s greatest chill factor lies in the knowledge that freak accidents can and do happen, and that the universe has a tendency to be especially cruel in its randomness. Because terrible things don't just happen for no reason… right?

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Francesca Annis, "Widow of the Web" from *Krull* (1983)

A belated happy 80th birthday to Francesca Annis, who played *Krull*'s ancient oracle before moving on to star as Lady Jessica in David Lynch's *Dune* the following year. For the aged version of the Widow, Annis was aided by prosthetics from makeup artist Nick Maley, who worked on the similarly bonkers *Lifeforce* (1985) and created Yoda for George Lucas. A prolific performer on screen and stage, Annis' early roles included parts in *Carry on Teacher* (1959) and *Cleopatra* (1963), prior to performing with the Royal Shakespeare Company during the 1970s where she portrayed Lady Macbeth in Polanski's 1971 film, famously performing the sleepwalking scene unclothed. Post-*Krull*, Annis was Gertrude in a London production of *Hamlet* (where she met future husband Ralph Fiennes), appeared with Billy Connolly in *The Debt Collector* (1999), and performed Turgenev at the National Theatre. She continues to work across film, theatre, and television, most recently on the BBC's *Showtrial*, and with Sir Ian McKellen in *Hamlet* (both 2024).

LOUIS FLETCHER

NEEDFUL THINGS

1 *DEXTER* EYESHADOW PALETTE

$59 USD

Inspired by TV's favourite serial killer who keeps slides of his victims' blood in a wooden case, this eleven-pan eyeshadow palette is to die for! With dried-blood mattes and knife-gleam metallics named after key *Dexter* characters, this limited-edition collector's box will become the sharpest tool in your makeup kit.

Lethalcosmetics.com

2 SPINDERELLA PLATFORM SANDALS

$188 USD

Mommy longlegs! Reach new heights (six inches, to be exact) with these spiderweb-spangled platform sandals, designed by Charla Tedrick for the wickedest of black widows. With a web mesh upper and platform wedge covered in vegan suede, they're as cruelty-free as they are cute as heck.

Shopcharlatedrick.com

3 HERESY WOODCUT BEDDING

$98 USD

Wouldst thou like to sleep deliciously? Ensure your dreams are as dark as your soul with medieval woodcut-inspired bedding. Available in U.S. double and king sizes, the duvet cover and pillowcases are festooned in all manner of occult designs, inspired by witchcraft imagery and illustrations from the famed *Malleus Maleficarum*. Sweet dreams!

Disturbia.us

4 *HALLOWEEN II* LUNCHBOX

$26 USD

Back to school means packed lunches, and Fright Rags has you covered! Pack your PB&J in style with an officially licensed *Halloween II* lunchbox, featuring a custom-embossed design with faux distressing and a metal-wrapped 12 oz. Haddonfield Memorial Hospital thermos with a cup for a lid, so you can share with your sister. Or is she…?

Fright-rags.com

5 BLACK LODGE BAG

$152 USD

Have you given yourself your daily present? This round handbag is as damn fine as a cup of diner coffee, with David Lynch's iconic chevron vinyl appliqué in front, detachable woven strap, inner pockets, chrome hardware, and a surprise printed lining! You won't want to take a fire walk without it.

Deadcatsclub.com

HANDMADE HORRORS

CHRISTIAN WATERSON'S GAPING GOBS

There's nothing quite like a classic '80s body horror movie. From David Cronenberg classics *The Fly* and *Videodrome* to John Carpenter's iconic *The Thing*, these gruesome flicks practically defined the era with their innovative special effects and jaw-dropping transformation scenes. That creature-melding imagery used to terrify UK-based sculptor Christian Waterson as a child, but now sparks inspiration for his own creative sculptures: gaping gobs. As functional home decor adorned with toothy faces, bulging eyes, and grotesquely twisted skin (think Brian Yuzna's *Society*), gaping gobs capture the essence of these powerful tales with clocks, mirrors, ashtrays, and incense holders, framed by yawning mouths and grinning heads that stretch and melt into one another.

"I had nightmares after seeing a poster for *An American Werewolf in London* hanging outside the cinema with the image of a half-changed David Naughton screaming in pain," he tells *Rue Morgue.* "As I got older, I started to enjoy horror films and novels. I read Stephen King and Clive Barker then devoured art books about Francis Bacon and H.R. Giger."

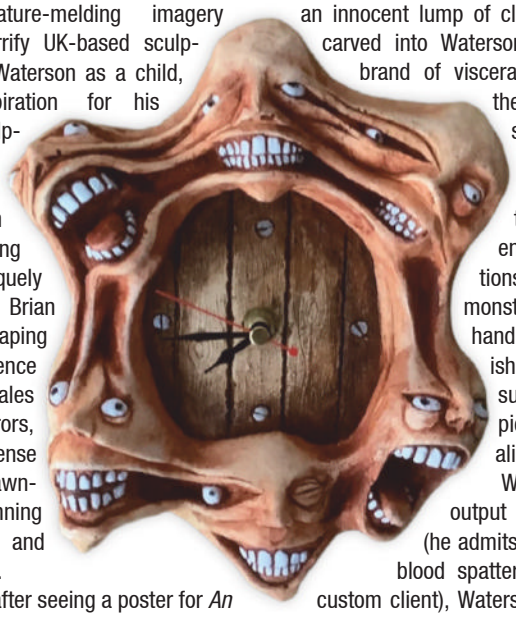
Each sculpture begins as an innocent lump of clay, hand-carved into Waterson's particular brand of visceral nightmare. Once the original form takes shape, he creates a latex mould to be filled with plaster, allowing endless iterations of the same monstrous figurine; hand-painted finishing touches ensure that no two pieces are exactly alike.

While his creative output can be disturbing (he admits to adding stitches, blood spatters, and gore for a custom client), Waterson's pieces also allow for a touch of humour with melded maws that wear knowing, sinister or off-kilter grins.

"The best art comes from an unsettling or emotional place," says the artist. "As a kid, I was scared of the dark all the way up to a really embarrassing age. My solution I suppose was to make something horrific, with a spoonful of humour, maybe as a loving middle finger to the movies that caused me so many sleepless nights."

Find the whole gallery of gobs that gape at Waterson's Etsy shop, and on Instagram at @gapinggobs1.

JENN ADAMS



CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES

HALLOWEEN II ORIGINAL MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK

(Varèse Sarabande Records, Inc., 1981)

After the tremendous success of John Carpenter's 1978 classic, *Halloween*, it was only a matter of time until a sequel would be produced. Hitting cinemas in October 1981, *Halloween II* brought back many of the key players from the first movie: stars Jamie Lee Curtis and Donald Pleasence, producer/co-writer Debra Hill, and Carpenter (who would co-produce and co-write the film with Hill but would pass directorial duties onto newcomer Rick Rosenthal). Composer Alan Howarth was approached by Carpenter to collaborate on the sequel's score, with the resultant tracks being moodier reworkings of the original film's musical cues. The iconic theme song, for instance, was now infused with a grandiose, synthesizer organ sound. A soundtrack album was released by Varèse Sarabande Records in 1981, with the front cover showcasing the movie's famed pumpkin skull poster artwork and the back sporting liner notes from Howarth and stills from the film. As featured in the movie, the catchy 1950s tune "Mr. Sandman" by The Chordettes also appears on the album. Copies of the record can sell for between $100 and $150 on eBay.

JAMES BURRELL

ORIGINAL MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK
HALLOWEEN II
Music Composed and Performed by JOHN CARPENTER
in association with ALAN HOWARTH

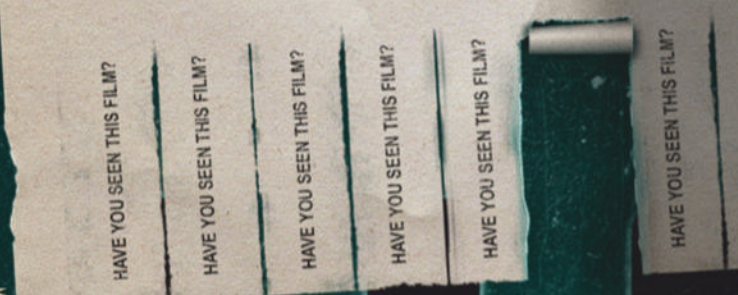
MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM

One of the great tragedies of horror cinema belongs to those movies – big and small – that were destroyed by history. Among those forever lost, few are as prized as Tod Browning's *London After Midnight*, starring the late, great Lon Chaney. This Halloween, *Rue Morgue* unearths some of the genre's dearly departed originals, and explores why Browning's 1927 film still lingers in our collective imagination

MISSING

LEGACY OF HORROR

By Kelly Robinson


HAVE YOU SEEN THIS FILM?
HAVE YOU SEEN THIS FILM?
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HAVE YOU SEEN THIS FILM?
HAVE YOU SEEN THIS FILM?

ON THE EVENING OF AUGUST 10, 1965, JUST BEFORE TEN, A WORKER ON THE MGM STUDIO LOT IN CULVER CITY HEARD A LOUD SOUND. IT TURNED OUT TO BE THE EXPLOSION OF film vault number seven, where just moments before, a spark from an electrical short ignited a reel of nitrate film. The resulting heat was so intense that the six-inch concrete roof collapsed on top of the hundreds of film reels stored there, mostly silents and early talkies. The blaze burned into the night and none of the films survived. Among them was the only known copy of a film called *London After Midnight*.

Fans of classic horror are still reeling from the blow. After all, *London* starred the great Lon Chaney, the Man of a Thousand Faces himself, who had portrayed the disfigured fiend of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), the heartbreakingly deformed Quasimodo of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923), and the sly sideshow ventriloquist of *The Unholy Three* (1925). In *London After Midnight*, Chaney played a dual role as a completely unhinged-looking vampire (the only such role in his career) and a Scotland Yard detective. Directed by the legendary Tod Browning, the 1927 film preceded the director's most-loved work (*Dracula*, 1931 and *Freaks*, 1932), but came right on the heels of *The Unknown* (1927), perhaps the greatest of Chaney and Browning's collaborations. From surviving stills, we know the film's old dark house setting was drenched in spooky atmosphere, with cobwebs, secret panels, bats, and even a Bat Girl. There are plenty more reasons to lament the film's loss, from Browning's pre-*Dracula* use of a crypt armadillo to the only onscreen appearance of Chaney's famous makeup case.

And even though almost no one alive has seen *London After Midnight*, the film's influence still permeates horror culture. Chaney's wide-eyed, razor-toothed image as the Man in the Beaver Hat (as his vampire character is known) has become a staple on everything from tote bags to tea bags. Horror hosts like Zomboo and Svengoolie have borrowed aspects of his look to create their TV personas, as did Disney when creating the Hatbox Ghost for The Haunted Mansion. Director Jennifer Kent admitted in interviews that Chaney's image in *London After Midnight* directly inspired 2014's *The Babadook*, and the film is referenced in band names, songs, and on television shows such as *Whitechapel*.

With all the merchandising, and the mountain of press the film still generates, you'd think *London After Midnight* was the only film destroyed in that vault fire. At times it can seem like it's the only lost film in the world. In the decades since its loss, the movie has become the poster child for lost film, especially in horror. It generates an allure that doesn't seem to exist for other lost titles.

The reality is, there are so many lost films that the number is difficult to even calculate. According to the Library of Congress, of the 10,919 silent films released by major American studios, only 14% still exist in their original format. And vault fires weren't the only culprit; almost as many reels were lost due to poor storage, nitrate stock literally melting away or crumbling to dust when its needs for temperature and humidity control weren't met. Human beings have been as destructive as the elements, with studios sometimes chucking whole archives of films they didn't consider worth saving. In other countries, films have been lost to earthquakes, bombing, or totalitarian censorship.

Though lost films sometimes do turn up, MGM's rigid policies unintentionally made their titles less likely to be found. Studios thought the cost of shipping the reels back was too high, so New Zealand was often the end of the line for many film canisters (a number of previously lost films have appeared in New Zealand, notably Alfred Hitchcock's 1924 feature *The White Shadow*). However, MGM was vigilant about retrieving its property, so the films incinerated in their vaults were often the only ones in existence. In a maddening case of what-might-have-been, the copyright office of the Library of Congress received two 35mm prints of *London After Midnight* in 1928, registered the copyright, and because they didn't yet have nitrate storage facilities, sent them right back.

So, the fact that *London After Midnight* is lost is not unusual, but the enthusiasm surrounding it is. How it came to be the holy grail of lost films is partly a matter of public relations.

Dracula Before Dracula: *Much of* ***London After Midnight****'s lingering mystique has to do with Lon Chaney's performance as the Man in the Beaver Hat, a unique spin on the cinematic vampire.*

Magazine editor and sci-fi guru Forrest J Ackerman recalled seeing the film as a child, an event that left a tremendous impression on him, especially the look of Chaney in his vampire makeup, an image he said was "etched in my brain with nitrate acid."

Ackerman ballyhooed the film in the pages of his *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine, and Basil Gogos' artwork of Lon Chaney in his vampire makeup was featured on the cover twice, in 1962 and 1970. The painting captured the essence of the character as the editor remembered him, with "those bulging orbs, like hard-boiled eggs with licorice buttons embedded in each oval tip," and "that scraggly gray hair escaping wildly at the sides of his head, as though he'd just washed his hair with mildew and couldn't do a thing with it." The *FMoF* covers, which stared out to consumers from their local newsstands, left a lasting impression on anyone who saw them.

In 1980, *London After Midnight* was crammed into the consciousness of everyday people who didn't know *Famous Monsters* from *Field & Stream*. The American Film Institute released a list of the "Ten Most Important Lost Films," which included the Browning/Chaney classic, along with other titles such as

Cleopatra (1917) and the now-found Edison Studios' *Frankenstein* (1910, see *RM#194*). The AFI list was syndicated in daily papers across the country and beyond, instantly sealing *London After Midnight*'s status as a most-wanted film.

"AT LEAST 100 OF [LON CHANEY'S] FILMS ARE MISSING – THAT'S MORE THAN TWICE AS MANY LOST THAN THERE ARE FULLY EXTANT."

It's now known that the titles on the list were selected somewhat arbitrarily, in some cases attempting to shake loose films that were thought to be held by private collectors, while others were chosen for their mass appeal, to bring public attention to the matter of film preservation. In other words, even the American Film Institute didn't think the ten films were necessarily the most important. But it didn't matter. The furor for *London After Midnight* had begun and persists to this day.

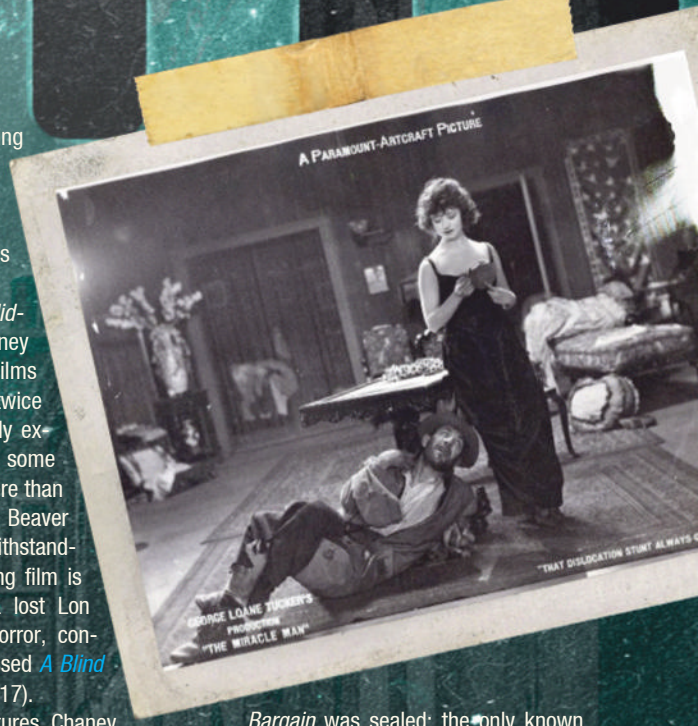
In classic film circles online, April 1 might as well be called "*London After Midnight* is Found Day." News reporting of the film's recovery is now an overused but still persistent annual joke. Good-natured pranks have even backfired on a few well-meaning film folk: preservationist Eric Grayson, a.k.a. Dr. Film, is still plagued by people who insist he's hoarding a copy of the movie because of an April Fool's Day post he made in 2013. Other reports on finding the film aren't meant as a joke, taking the form of outright hoaxes. Every few years, it seems, someone insists that they own a copy of *London After Midnight*, know someone who has it, or have seen it screened.

It's telling that the perpetrators of these hoaxes always focus on this one film. No one is crashing message boards to claim they have seen the lost *Sweeney Todd* (1926) or Oscar Micheaux's *The Conjure Woman* (1926). It's always *London After Midnight*. There's more frisson in pretending to find what they think of as the quintessential lost film. The fact that there are thousands of other lost films never seems to cross the hoaxers' minds.

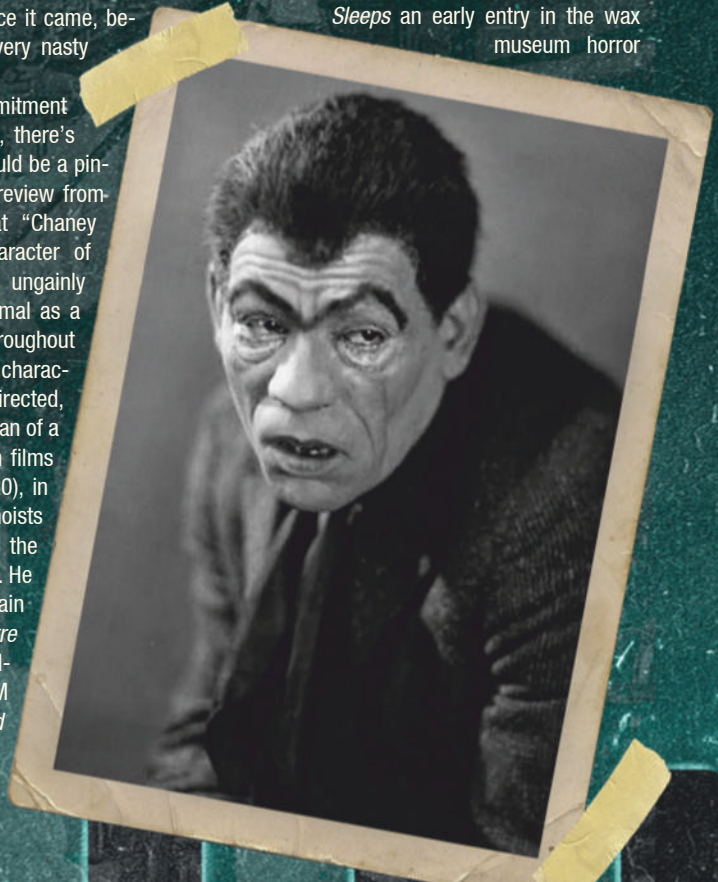
Unfortunately, *London After Midnight* isn't the only lost Lon Chaney film. At least 100 of the actor's films are missing – that's more than twice as many lost than there are fully extant. Among his lost works are some that constitute true horror far more than his portrayal of the Man in the Beaver Hat. His fearsome visage notwithstanding, the vampire in the Browning film is not a supernatural one. For a lost Lon Chaney film that's decidedly horror, consider the tragically under-discussed *A Blind Bargain* (1922, see sidebar on p.17).

The Goldwyn production features Chaney in a dual role as both a vivisectionist of the Dr. Moreau variety and his half-human/half-ape assistant. Critics of the time praised his performance in both roles, saying that he "does the most startling work of his career," and that as the ape man, he "has completely divested himself of human attributes," continuing that "if you didn't have your program, you would hardly know he was playing two parts." The *L.A. Times* was less pleased, however, saying it should be retitled "Chamber of Horrors," the type of review that would likely draw genre fans into the theatre. "*A Blind Bargain,*" the reviewer said, "can go back whence it came, because it is not art, but very nasty medicine."

Knowing Chaney's commitment to physicality in his roles, there's no doubt his ape man would be a pinnacle performance. In a review from 1922, *Variety* stated that "Chaney predominates in the character of the man-ape, using the ungainly lope of the supposed animal as a means of locomotion throughout the interpretation of the character." Wallace Worsley directed, and he had directed the Man of a Thousand Faces before in films such as *The Penalty* (1920), in which a legless Chaney hoists and flings himself around the screen with studied agility. He would direct the actor again in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in 1923. When Goldwyn was folded into MGM in 1924, the fate of *A Blind Bargain* was sealed; the only known copy of the film was destroyed in the same vault fire that took *London After Midnight*.



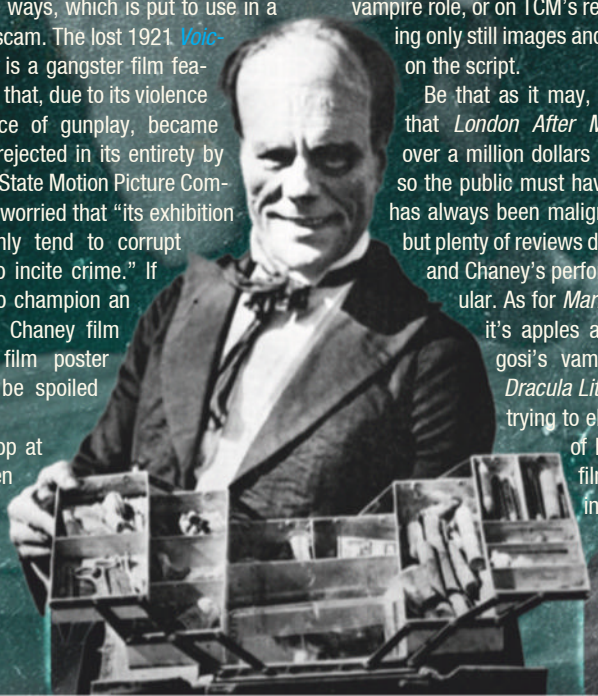
While Paris Sleeps (1923), directed by Maurice Tourneur, was filmed in 1920 for Paramount, but for unknown reasons remained unreleased for three years. Some speculate that the film's more gruesome elements tied it up with censors for so long that it ended up shelved, purchased, and distributed by Hodkinson Co. after Lon Chaney achieved fame. The gruesome elements, of course, are what we're here for, and they take place in a wax museum chamber of horrors, making *While Paris Sleeps* an early entry in the wax museum horror



subgenre. Press releases touted Tourneur's delivering of "the most realistic reproduction of a torture chamber ever seen."

In it, Chaney plays a sculptor, Santodos, who works at the wax museum. He teams up with the insane Father Marionette, the museum's owner, to kill off his romantic rival. Marionette's plan involves slow torture with a death machine of his invention, a scene that *Exhibitors Trade Review* called one of the film's "weirdest and most revolting moments," before dismissing it as "sordid." *Moving Picture World*, meanwhile, recognized the audience for such things: "There are no doubt a considerable number of patrons who are fascinated by a strain of morbidity. For this class, the picture will provide thrilling entertainment." The loss of the film is certainly a blow for those of us in that morbid class.

Other lost films of Chaney's may be lighter on horror elements but still have plenty of reasons to attract genre fans. In *The Miracle Man* (1919), he plays a character known as "The Frog," a contortionist who can twist his limbs in implausible ways, which is put to use in a faith-healing scam. The lost 1921 *Voices of the City* is a gangster film featuring Chaney that, due to its violence and prevalence of gunplay, became the first film rejected in its entirety by the New York State Motion Picture Commission, who worried that "its exhibition would not only tend to corrupt morals, but to incite crime." If one wanted to champion an alternate Lon Chaney film as the lost film poster child, they'd be spoiled for choice.



But why stop at Chaney? When the topic of most-wanted lost films is brought up, film historians and writers each have their own favourites. Often mentioned are the horror films of F.W. Murnau, whose lost *Der Januskopf* (1920) gives the *Nosferatu* treatment to *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* – in other words, he changed the names but kept the story. And what about the number of missing horror film firsts? Cinema's first werewolf is one example (*The Werewolf*, 1913), or the first adaptation of *The Man Who Laughs* (1909) or *The Phantom of the Opera* (1916). These are all titles – and there are hundreds more – that deserve to be talked about and explored.

Certainly, there are those who would be glad to see a lost film other than *London After Midnight* get attention. There are those who like to mention its reviews, notably from film historian William K. Everson, who claimed to have seen it in the 1950s and said it was no great shakes. Others base their ideas about *London After Midnight* on Tod Browning's 1935 reimagining *Mark of the Vampire*, with Bela Lugosi in the vampire role, or on TCM's reconstruction, using only still images and intertitles based on the script.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that *London After Midnight* grossed over a million dollars in 1920s money, so the public must have liked it. Horror has always been maligned in the press, but plenty of reviews did praise the film, and Chaney's performance in particular. As for *Mark of the Vampire*, it's apples and oranges: Lugosi's vampire seems like *Dracula Lite*, with Browning trying to eke a bit more out of his popular 1931 film. Chaney's Man in the Beaver Hat, on the other hand, is cut from whole cloth, a character unique to film. The talkiness of *Mark of the Vampire* wouldn't be an issue with a silent film, and there's a good chance that in *London After Midnight*, the atmosphere would pull more focus. Making judgments about the film based on the reconstruction is equally futile. Film stills aren't frames; they're posed scenes that have an inherent theatricality.

Ultimately, were *London After Midnight* to be found, it would probably be neither as great as some fantasize, nor as bad as some believe. It doesn't matter if it's the greatest silent horror film ever made, because it doesn't need to be. Its value as a found film would lie in the fact that we'd get to evaluate it and would have the chance to compare it to other works. We'd have the chance to see things we've never seen, and can't see in still images, like Chaney's walk, or the rolling of his eyeballs mentioned in several reviews. We'd be able to have honest, real opinions that aren't based on conjecture.

As a poster child for lost films, *London After Midnight* is certainly a fine one. Chaney's image has been powerful enough to rise above the film's ashes and cast a shadow across 100 years of ensuing horror cinema – and that's saying a lot. And while there are plenty of potentially great lost films, many of them haven't left enough of a paper trail to whet the public appetite. A film with an image as bold and haunting as this one is more attention-grabbing than any grainy newspaper clipping. But, if you'd rather promote a different lost film, you should… and often! More attention to the need for film preservation can only be a good thing.

One of the most sought-after lost films from Lon Chaney's career, 1922's *A Blind Bargain* gets a retro-modern reimagining with a dash of Crispin Glover

LOST CHANEY REIMAGINED

BY **ANDREA SUBISSATI**

WE'RE UNLIKELY TO EVER LAY EYES ON THE ORIGINAL SILENT FILM *A BLIND BARGAIN*, AS THE MOVIE NOW ONLY EXISTS IN THE imaginations of classic horror fans. It premiered in December of 1922 at the Capitol Theatre in New York City, meeting with a standing ovation and glowing reviews of Lon Chaney delivering what might have been a career-defining performance in his dual role as a mad scientist and one of his own experiments, a hybrid hunchbacked "ape man." But fear not, fright fans, for filmmaker Paul Bunnell delivers what's probably the next best thing in his modern reimagining of the tale, currently playing festivals.

"I collect 16mm film and 35mm film prints, and I've always been a fan of the old Universal horror films," Bunnell explains, adding that he shot his version entirely on Super 16 film for a vintage *Night Gallery* feel. "When I was a kid, I grew up watching the classics – the early Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi and all of that stuff – so I've been very familiar with those films and still, to this day, they have a close place in my heart. Now, if I could just pry them out!"

Bunnell's reimagining mines *The Island of Doctor Moreau*-esque plot from the original lost film, in which failed writer Robert Sandell (Raymond McKee) makes a desperate (blind) bargain with Dr. Arthur Lamb (Chaney), agreeing to be experimented upon in order to fund care for his ailing mother (Virginia True Boardman). The reimagining moves the story to the swinging early '70s, where troubled veteran Dominic Fontaine (Jake Horowitz) dabbles in drug deals before being propositioned by the inscrutable Dr. Gruder (one Crispin Hellion Glover). Their blind bargain? Dom must trick his elderly mother (Amy Wright) into thinking she's spending a day at the spa, but really, Dr. Gruder has genetic experimentation on his mad mind, including one that might hold the key to eternal youth. Transformed into a stunning younger version of herself (Annalisa Cochrane), Dom's mom has got it going on – but at what cost?

"We took elements [of the original], and sort of wove them together and tried to make it more of a 1970 piece," says Bunnell, who co-scripted with John Falotico, based on a story by Bing Bailey. "It was really just a collaboration of different ideas and themes all stemmed from that Lon Chaney original. But it's [not] a direct remake. If I were doing a direct remake, I would have shot it in black-and-white, and it would have a totally different feel."

Indeed, Bunnell's take on the tale leans into the surreal side of horror with a groovy musical interlude, a psychedelic mad science sequence, and… well, the mere presence of Crispin Glover. Equal parts enigmatic and charismatic, Hollywood's favourite weirdo hasn't lost his touch for adding his own secret sauce to the proceedings, even when the cameras were rolling.

"After looking into Brad Dourif [for the role], who said he was retired, I thought, 'Well, wait a minute. The young Brad is Crispin Glover!'" Bunnell recalls, adding that he instantly bonded with the fellow filmmaker about their love of celluloid, their ideas for Dr. Gruder, and treating this role, and every role, with the utmost seriousness.

"I think he gives a really good performance in this movie," says Bunnell. "I mean, it's not the most unhinged thing, because the role didn't call for it, but he's right on the money for every little scene he does. And for anybody that is a Crispin Glover fan, I think they're going to enjoy this movie. You're not getting the over-the-top *Willard*-type-of-thing performance, but you are getting a wonderful Crispin Glover characterization, a character that he came up with, and I'm very happy with it."

Back in the 1970s and '80s, a golden age of made-for-TV horror movies terrorized a generation of fright fans. And though many of these productions were lost over the years, they were never forgotten… and are now being recovered

IT CAME FROM THE TV!!!

BY **AMANDA REYES**

FOR MANY READERS OF THIS MAGAZINE, A TELEVISION IS A SCREEN LIKELY MOUNTED ON your wall that gives you access to streaming services galore, video sharing platforms, games, and more. Our more seasoned readers, however, may remember that time before the internet, VOD, or even video games, when a television set was a one-size-fits-all device that projected a wide array of entertainment from the corner of your living room. Programs that were birthed on and for TV abound, and in the genre space one need to look no further than *The Twilight Zone*, *Tales From the Crypt* or Canada's own *Hilarious House of Frightenstein*.

Beyond these, however, was the "made-for-TV movie," a film specific to the television set, ostensibly created to incentivize people to stay home and watch what was promoted as the equivalent of a theatrical release. The made-for-TV movie gave us plenty of horror: Skorzeny, the unstoppable vampire from *The Night Stalker* (1972), the diminutive terror of the Zuni Fetish Doll from *Trilogy of Terror* (1975), and the now classic frights of *Salem's Lot* (1979). Made-for-TV movies not only gave many of us our first taste of terror, they opened the floodgates of our imagination

Small Screen Scares: *1972's* ***Gargoyles*** *was the first film to feature the work of Stan Winston, for which he would win an Emmy for Outstanding Achievement in Makeup (with Ellis Burman Jr. and Del Armstrong).*

(think of the winged creatures in the 1972 cult classic *Gargoyles* for a great example). Visions of blood showers from the surprisingly brutal haunted house mystery *This House Possessed* (1981), Kim Novak's wicked smile in the claustrophobic lost-at-sea chiller *Satan's Triangle* (1975), the haunting line "Oh Daddy, I hate being dead," from the espionage/supernatural hybrid *Daughter of the Mind* (1969), and the infamous "Get Dead" dance number that follows an entire town taken over by a centuries' old curse in the this-needs-to-come-out-now fan favourite *The Midnight Hour* (1985) seeped their way into our collective consciousness just as much as any theatrical releases of the era.

Although they would be generally disregarded or dismissed, the made-for-TV horror movie in its heyday of the 1970s into the 1980s offered audiences a smorgasbord of unforgettable cinematic delights. All in all, thousands of quality films – genre and otherwise – were produced, with many airing only once, never to be seen again. While some titles have since emerged over the years on home video, only a small percentage enjoyed a release outside of their original airing. Thus, the entire medium of the made-for-TV movie is actually a series of lost films – although hardly forgotten.

Birth of a Thriller

The made-for-TV movie dominated for many years, but the format did not start off with a bang. NBC tried its hand at producing the first small-screen film in 1964 with *See How They Run*, a jet-setting mystery about three children who go on the run after the murder of their father. They traverse the globe along with their all-star castmates, which include Leslie Nielsen, John Forsythe, and George Kennedy (Pamela Franklin from *The Innocents* plays one of the children). While the film is quite stylish and entertaining, it was greeted with mediocre ratings, and only a few dozen telefilms were produced over the next few years.

Then, in 1969, ABC ambitiously set out to air a new feature-length film every week throughout the television season. The series was aptly titled *ABC Movie of the Week* (1969-1975), and audiences loved it, flocking to their couches in droves. The first film in the series, *Seven in Darkness*, was already drawing from the genre well with its fanciful premise regarding a group of blind people stranded on a mountain. It landed in the top ten most-watched programs for the week: thrillers were officially in.

The popularity of the *ABC Movie of the Week* proved the format could be profitable and gave birth to a production frenzy as each network developed their own original telefilm series. By the mid-'70s, there was a new made-for-TV movie running almost every night of the week. The very nature of the feverish production schedules had producers looking towards their theatrical B-movie counterparts for guidance. As with feature films, made-for-TV horror was considered material that was easy to sell, and even easier to produce.

Using this blueprint, the networks aired dozens, if not literally hundreds of forgotten horror gems that traversed the subgenre landscape. There were killer kid flicks such as *A Little Game* (1971) and its most famous small-screen brethren *Bad Ronald* (1974), animal-run-amok thrillers like *The Most Dangerous Game*-with-tigers chiller *Maneater* (1973), and the eco-horror-driven *Locusts* (1974). The telefilm even charts the popular slasher cycle from proto-slashers like the subversive *Five Desperate Women* (1971) to full-blown slashers such

"THE ENTIRE MEDIUM OF THE MADE-FOR-TV MOVIE IS ACTUALLY A SERIES OF LOST FILMS."

as the schoolgirls-in-peril thriller *Deadly Lessons* (1983). And, oh, the supernatural delights of which there are too many to list (but 1978's all-star *Cruise into Terror* with horror royalty including Christopher and Lynda Day George is a good place to start)! Despite the lack of visceral violence in these productions, the telefilm always found a way to mimic and reproduce – and most importantly, to entertain.

Recovering a Mystery

Of course, the most enduring thing about great made-for-TV movies is that many live in obscurity, largely due to budgetary reasons. ABC's *The Wide World of Mystery*, for example, ran from 1973 to 1976, and is part of a larger programming umbrella called *ABC's Wide World of Entertainment*, which was the network's attempt to lure audiences away from *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* on NBC and the myriad theatricals and telefilm reruns airing on CBS's night owl schedule. As with their prime-time siblings, the intent was always to air these telefilms only once – and furthermore, because they were videotape productions, ABC often wiped the original recording, reusing the tape for another project.

"The Satan Murders"
When you deal in death... there's the Devil to pay. Larry Blyden and Salome Jens star.
Wide World MYSTERY
abc Tonight 11:30 2

Not much was made of this frugal but dreadful practice until many years later, when online forum members began sharing hazy recollections of films with titles such as *Death is a Bad Trip* and *The Haunting of Penthouse D* (both 1974). From here, a grassroots effort to recover these titles grew. While many a film lover helped to pull this movement together, much of the thanks belongs to a superfan named Dwayne Morris, who put in hours of research to gather the titles and reconstruct airdate timelines to start the heady search for copies of the films. Eventually his passion got him to the Library of Congress who, along with the UCLA Film and Television Archive, have put in great work towards cataloguing and preserving the *Wide World of Mystery* films and their legacy. Currently, of the 64 episodes, slightly over two dozen are still missing, including the much sought-after *Satan Murders* (1974) and *The Two Deaths of Sean Doolittle* (1975).

It is feared they are long gone but take heart: what does remain available from this era of fright fare is absolutely worth the effort to seek out. While it's probably no surprise that only a few of the ABC *Wide World of Mystery* offerings have ever enjoyed a legitimate home video release, some titles have resurfaced as bootlegs or as poor-quality YouTube uploads (no complaints though because this is all that may be left of them). The claustrophobic thriller *Sorority Kill* and the

cheeky black comedy *Murder in the First Person Singular* (both 1974) are two prime examples of recently recovered episodes.

Kino Lorber recently released a five-film set from *The Wide World of Mystery* series which were produced under the heading *Classic Ghosts* and included *Screaming Skull*, *And the Bones Came Together*, *The Haunting of Rosalind*, *The House and the Brain*, and *Deadly Visitor*, all 1973. Assembled in collaboration with the UCLA Film and Television Archive, this is not only a win for those of us desperate to see as many of these odd and charming shot-on-video episodes as possible, but the *Classic Ghosts* – which are a mix of original teleplays and adaptations of old-school gothic short stories – are also of particular historical value because production features a mostly female crew. The films are produced by Jacqueline Babbin and four of the five entries are directed by women (Lela Swift and Gloria Monty directed two each). Not just a rarity in terms of the status of the films, but an anomaly in how *Wide World of Mystery* offered a prominent place for women working behind the scenes in television.

Faves From The Grave: *Kino Lorber's* ***Classic Ghosts*** *set brings five made-for-TV titles back from obscurity, including (from top)* ***Screaming Skull***, ***The Haunting of Rosalind***, *and* ***Deadly Visitor***.

Masters of the Small Screen

Certainly, it can be argued that all films are historical artifacts, but theatricals and telefilms are different beasts in many ways. Made-for-TV movies don't have the benefit of the same kind of documentation and, of course, over the years, the phrase "made-for-TV movie" became damning code for "less than," which some equate as less in need of that documentation, representation or saving. Which is too bad, considering that the TV movie was also the training ground for many filmmakers of note.

Take Steven Spielberg, whose cachet puts his first TV movie, *Duel* (1971), in a unique position in that interest in it has led to several releases on home video, including Universal Pictures Home Entertainment's recent shiny 4K. It's even screened theatrically throughout the world.

"THE MADE-FOR-TV HORROR MOVIE IN ITS HEYDAY OF THE 1970s INTO THE 1980s OFFERED AUDIENCES A SMORGASBORD OF UNFORGETTABLE CINEMATIC DELIGHTS."

But, what of Spielberg's other made-for-TV genre movie, *Something Evil*? Premiering on CBS in 1972, *Something Evil* stars Darren McGavin and Sandy Dennis as a couple who move to the country with their two young children, hoping to get away from the perils of urban living. However, what they find at their quaint little farmhouse is far more sinister than anything seen on the mean city streets they left behind. Although predating William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, *Something Evil* came after William Peter Blatty's novel, and hits a few of the same terrifying beats. It's forgivable though, because what's important about this eerie and creepy telefilm is that it proves Spielberg's sure hand from *Duel* wasn't a fluke. An extremely engaging, uneasy, and worthwhile watch, *Something Evil* also features some early glimpses of signature Spielberg, including the Spielberg Face (closeup shots of awestruck characters), as well as his ability to let his camera wander in and out of casual conversations, placing the viewer directly into a scene. In spite of the beautiful photography by Bill Butler (who'd work with Spielberg again on *Jaws*) and Dennis' wistful and compelling perfor-

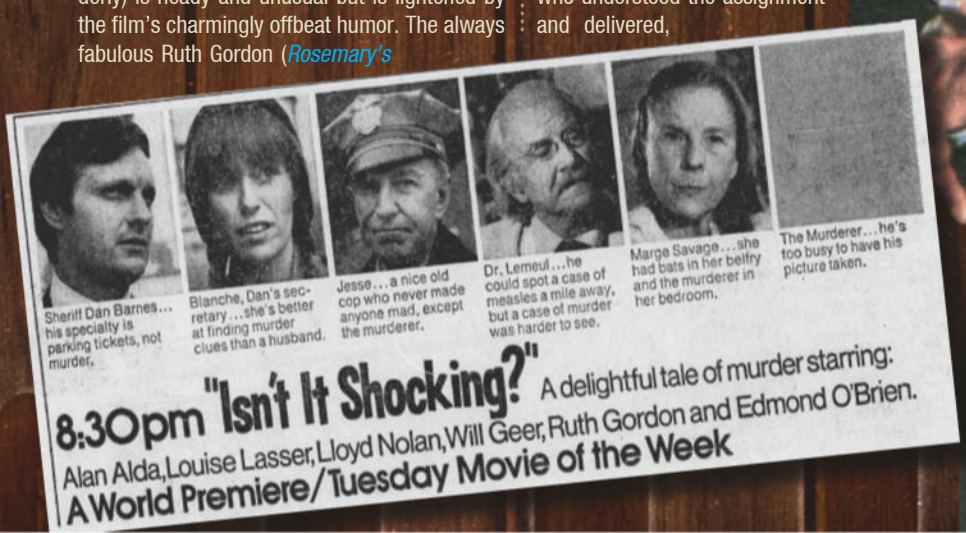
Unholy Origins: *Never released on home video, Steven Spielberg's* ***Something Evil*** *(1972) showcased many filmic techniques that would become his signature trademarks later on.*

mance, *Something Evil* has never been released on home video in any format other than fuzzy bootlegs, doing its legacy no favours.

There are other big names who got their start in small-screen horror as well. John Badham (*Saturday Night Fever*, *WarGames*) was slaving away on episodic television in the early 1970s when he oversaw the darkly comedic proto-slasher *Isn't it Shocking?* (1973). Alan Alda plays a small-town sheriff who finds himself investigating a series of murders rocking the quaint retirement community. The killer's choice of weapon is most bizarre too – he uses a homemade defibrillator to give his elderly victims heart attacks! The unsettling murder scenes feature victims stripped naked (never seen on camera, of course), with the killer leaving remnants of his candy bars behind. The concept of senicide (killing the elderly) is heady and unusual but is lightened by the film's charmingly offbeat humor. The always fabulous Ruth Gordon (*Rosemary's Baby*) steals the show as the world's oldest final girl.

Then, there's TV stalwart Steven Bochco, the creator of the hit series *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987). Before he and his *Hill Street* co-creator, Michael Kozoll, worked on that project, the two collaborated on the lush and suspenseful modern-gothic chiller *Vampire* (1979). This pilot film impresses with Richard Lynch as the suave bloodsucker, and he's got great support from his stalwart castmates, which include Jason Miller and E.G. Marshall as vampire hunters.

The TV movie is more than just a sandbox for emerging theatrical filmmakers to play in, however. Television movies supported a number of talented journeymen who understood the assignment and delivered,


Sheriff Dan Barnes... his specialty is parking tickets, not murder.
Blanche, Dan's secretary...she's better at finding murder clues than a husband.
Jesse...a nice old cop who never made anyone mad, except the murderer.
Dr. Lemeul...he could spot a case of measles a mile away, but a case of murder was harder to see.
Marge Savage...she had bats in her belfry and the murderer in her bedroom.
The Murderer...he's too busy to have his picture taken.
8:30pm "Isn't It Shocking?" A delightful tale of murder starring:
Alan Alda, Louise Lasser, Lloyd Nolan, Will Geer, Ruth Gordon and Edmond O'Brien.
A World Premiere/Tuesday Movie of the Week

even if only to see their work banished into obscurity after airing. Some names may ring a bell, such as John Llewellyn Moxey who directed the cult classic and highly rated *The Night Stalker*, introducing the world to the irrepressible Carl Kolchak (and Skorzeny). However, Moxey directed dozens of made-for-TV movies, the bulk of them genre films, including the suspenseful home invasion thriller *The Strange and Deadly Occurrence* (1974); the twisty-turny mystery *No Place to Hide* (1981), which lifts much from *Prom Night* which was released the year prior; the well-loved Christmas proto-slasher *Home for the Holidays* (1972, so it even predates *Black Christmas*!); dystopian sci-fi such as *The Last Child* (1971) and another eco-chiller, *Where Have all the People Gone?* (1974), as well as another vampire-hunting horror film, *I, Desire* (1982), which doesn't have the same street cred as *The Night Stalker* but is great fun on its own terms and deserves a chance at a second audience.

"THE MOST ENDURING THING ABOUT GREAT MADE-FOR-TV MOVIES IS THAT MANY LIVE IN OBSCURITY, LARGELY DUE TO BUDGETARY REASONS."

Although better known for suspenseful theatrical fare such as *Night Tide* and *What's the Matter with Helen?*, Curtis Harrington is an underappreciated master of the small screen as well. His supernatural noir *The Dead Don't Die* (1975) gave audiences a sinister Reggie Nalder before Tobe Hooper brought him to *Salem's Lot* (1979), and his slick 1973 occult entry *The Cat Creature* is Harrington at his cheekiest, with playful over-the-top set pieces and one cool feline beast (and gratuitous John Carradine!). Last, but certainly not least, *Killer Bees* (1974) is a mesmerizing piece of tele-terror that is eco-horror – but also so much more, with its great melodramatic subplot regarding control and legacy, while also boasting a game classic film star Gloria Swanson (*Sunset Boulevard*) who literally let Harrington envelop her in bees.

The master of small-screen glitz and glam, famed producer Aaron Spelling made hundreds of telefilms. Some of his genre titles include the previously mentioned *Home for the Holidays* and *The Last Child*, but he was also behind the eerie 1970 sci-fi flick *The Love War*, which may have served as a source of inspiration for *They Live* (no spoilers here – if you know, you know), and thrillers such as the conspiracy-driven *The Old Man Who Cried Wolf* (1970), the psycho-stalker entry *Love Hate Love* (1971), the intriguing mystery *A Taste of Evil* (1971), and the glamorous proto-slasher *Death Cruise* (1974), among so many others.

None of these films received anything past a VHS release, if they were even that lucky. However, there are two classic Spelling horror productions that are more in need of an upgrade than almost any other title mentioned thus far. The arctic-set spine-tingler *A Cold Night's Death* (1973), featuring two scientists (Eli Wallach and Robert Culp) who come to realize that they might not be alone in their isolated research centre, and the legitimately terrifying supernatural slasher *Don't Go to Sleep* (1982), which concerns a grieving family whose dead daughter returns from the grave looking to even the score, are two of the most loved – and most referenced – classics patiently awaiting their chance to rise from the ashes and find a new audience.

Late-Night Horrors

While the United States of America is known as the number one producer of made-for-TV movies, Canada boasts one of the more enigmatic small-screen titles on this ongoing list. In August of 1981, a newspaper article in the *Toronto Star* mentioned a new "made-for-TV movie" going into production for CTV. No title is provided, but it features a cast announcement that includes Claude Jutra, James Keach, and Helen Hughes. About a year later, in July 1982, *Variety* reviewed a movie with that cast, now titled *Till Death Do Us Part*, calling the "tele-film" an "audience grabber." Then, nothing else was heard about the movie until around 1986, when it started showing up on Canadian TV in late-night airings and found its way to video store shelves. The film revolves around a strange marriage counselling project located in an isolated old house where three dysfunctional couples find themselves being picked off one by one. Directed and co-written by Timothy Bond, this film is a reunion of sorts for Bond and some of the *Happy Birthday to Me* crew. Released in 1981, Bond wrote that film alongside Peter Jobin, who also co-wrote *Till Death Do Us Part*. And one of the stars is Matt Craven, best known in *Happy Birthday to Me* as the guy who gets shish kebabbed to death. The result of this new collaboration is a bizarre comedy/horror hybrid, boasting some great Canadian actors with cool genre cred, including Riva Spier from *Ghostkeeper* and Jack Creley from *Videodrome*.

Although it's not a made-for-TV movie, the British anthology show *Late Night Horror* has much to share with its American small-screen colleagues, particularly the *Wide World of Mystery* episodes. Produced by the BBC, *Late Night Horror* was the first genre series in England to be shown in colour. Six episodes in total aired in 1968; they were a mix of classic adaptations ("The Kiss of Blood" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) and newer stories from established contemporary genre scribes ("No Such Thing as a Vampire" by Richard Matheson, "William and Mary" by Roald Dahl). The series is distinguished by its desire to be as gory as TV would allow. There's an infamous memo by producer Harry Moore that proclaims, "We must do everything we can from the very beginning to stimulate suspense, tension, atmosphere, potential horror and HORROR! If there is blood, let's see the blood."

Late Night Horror appears to be a test run of sorts, airing late in the evening (hence the title!). While it was ceremoniously scrapped after the original six episodes aired, it did enjoy a rerun in 1970, and then just like the *Wide World of Mystery* episodes (and fairly customary of British television at the time), the tapes were wiped for reuse by the network. *Late Night Horror* has grown in interest over the years, and while nearly wholly lost, one episode has been located and preserved. *The Corpse Can't Play* is about as dark as a killer kid story can get, featuring a children's party gone horribly wrong. The rest of these episodes can only exist in our darkened imagination.

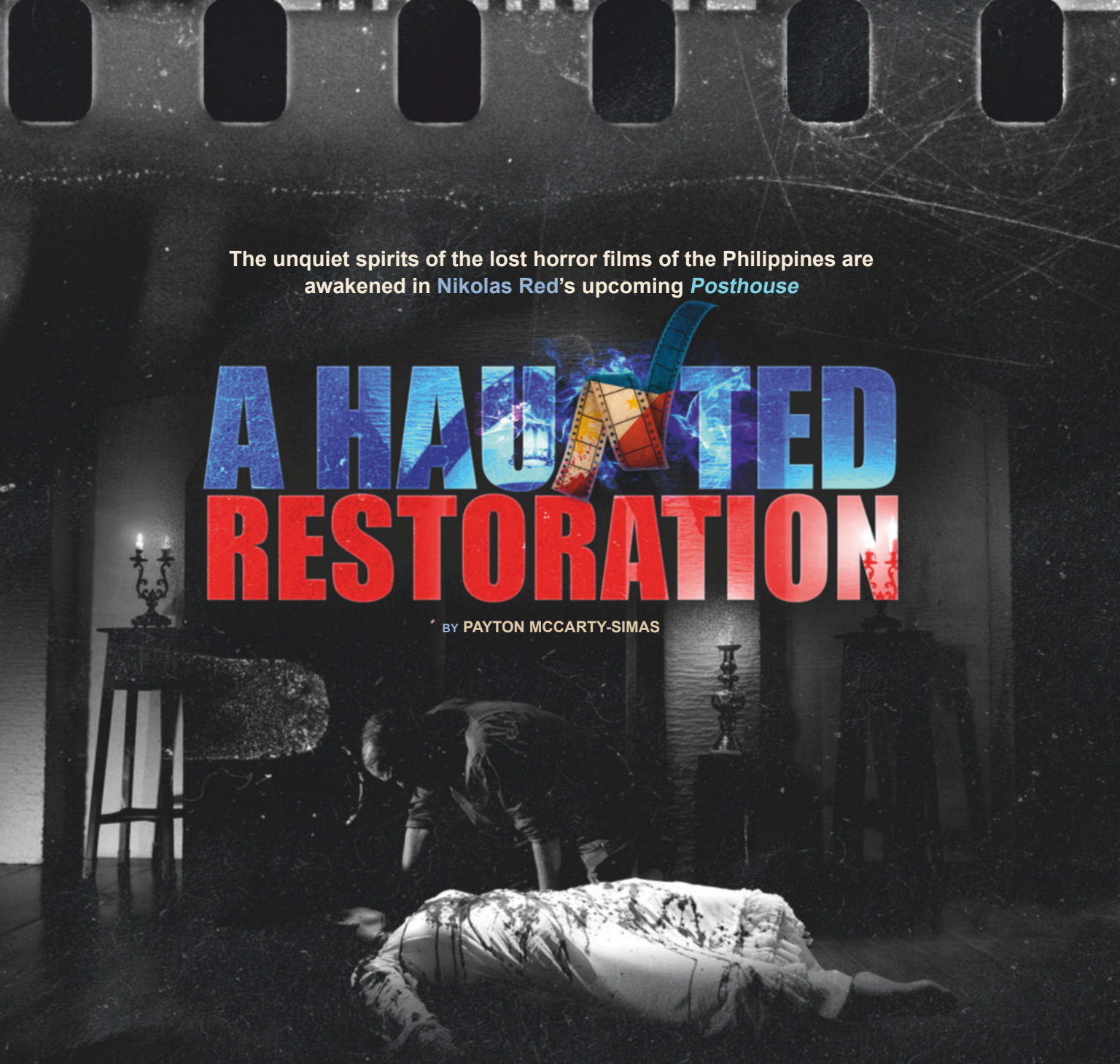
While *Late Night Horror* and some *Wide World of Mystery* titles appear to be lost forever, there is a brighter hope for most of the films mentioned here. Boutique home video labels are slowly but surely releasing TV movies that boast gorgeous restorations. Some titles are beyond belief too. Deep-dive genre films such as 1971's *The Deadly Dream* have never looked better, thanks to Imprint Films, and the same can be said for Kino Lorber's pristine upgrading of *The House That Would Not Die* (1970).

No doubt about it, there's still a treasure trove of creepy small-screen terror awaiting discovery and the best we can do is support these releases… and never change the channel.

The unquiet spirits of the lost horror films of the Philippines are awakened in Nikolas Red's upcoming *Posthouse*

A HAUNTED RESTORATION

BY PAYTON MCCARTY-SIMAS



THE HISTORY OF CINEMA IN THE PHILIPPINES IS ALMOST AS LONG AS THAT OF CINEMA ITSELF, BEGINNING WHEN ANTONIO RAMOS INTRODUCED MANILA TO THE CINEMATOGRAPH IN 1897. AND YET, OF THE approximately 350 films produced in the Philippines pre-WWII, all but four have been lost or destroyed during the myriad horrific wars and colonial occupations that have rocked the nation over the decades. In the Philippines, film history is haunted: no silent films remain. With his debut feature, *Posthouse*, Nikolas Red is inviting audiences to a seance to stir those voices.

The youngest in a family of influential filmmakers (his father, Raymond, and brother, Mikhail, have both left their mark on the nation's cinema), Nikolas wrapped production last spring and is eager to fill in these gaps in his country's history. Using these lost films as a starting point for a work of speculative horror fiction, Red conjures up the chilling tale of an editor named Cyril (Sid Lucero) who accidentally unleashes an ancient evil while working to complete a rediscovered silent film, left unfinished for decades. Sleep deprived and doubting his sanity, Cyril's fight for his life brings the fraught, murky past into the present using the surreal folklore of the region as a bridge made of celluloid.

Blending inspirations as varied as *Nosferatu* and *Sinister*, Red's *Posthouse* gives audiences a juicy, imagined peek into a vanished history and an all-too-real dark past. Plus – for fans of witch cinema, you've probably never seen one like this.

What made you decide to tackle the subject of lost silent Filipino films in a horror movie?

I think horror is still very effective as a vehicle to smuggle a more poignant message or some art-house elements. It's easier to smuggle those into this genre, because it's one of the genres that regu-

lar people would watch… It's a genre that you can use to say what you want to say to a certain demographic, or to draw parallels with anything political. [Horror is] always against something that's abusive, anything that's not right within your country. The real horrors that happen in society. So, it's a very easy genre to draw parallels with the types of events that you want to portray. So just to have that medium, to deliver a political message through horror is very effective and safe as an artist.

Is the horror genre popular in the Philippines?
I think the highest point of horror films here was the 2000s when Star Cinema, which was basically one of the biggest mainstream studios here, released a string of films which were very commercial, following in the wake of films like *The Ring* and many of these Japanese horrors. Southeast Asian horror films were effective with our audiences because, at the time, cinema tickets weren't as expensive as they are today, so going to cinema was pretty much like a weekly family event, and horror stood out because it's entertaining enough to bring most of your family. In the Philippines, we have big families, and when we go out to watch movies, pretty much all the relatives come. I found that horror is entertaining enough, while at the same time not that alienating, in terms of being too art house – [it won't] alienate the kids or the teenagers.

What drew you to the subject of lost films and what kind of research did you do as you were preparing to tell this story?
When I was a kid, my dad had all these weird-ass DVDs and laser discs lying around. One of them was this disc set of silent horror films of the 1920s that had, I think, *Phantom of the Opera*, *The Golem*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and *Nosferatu*. As I grew older, I did my research and learned more about silent films. The bulk of my research in terms of silent film history I did back when I was in college – I did a thesis that I carried over to this film. I read books from one of our most prominent film archivists and professors here in the Philippines, Professor Nick Deocampo. I read two of his books, one about Philippine cinema in the time of Spanish colonial rule and one about the American period. I was shocked to find that we also had our own silent films, but not one has been recovered! That made me sad. We've lost all of this history.

How did this situation inspire the story for* Posthouse*?
It's all a what-if question: what if we found the very first horror film made in the Philippines? What was it going to look like? How are we going to react to it? Audiences here in the Philippines aren't used to seeing silent films, so that could actually be something new for them, new imagery for them. I also always wondered why silent films in general aren't that used as a horror element. I mean, it's used in some films, particularly *The Babadook*. But that was actually my pitch to the people who were investing in my film, that this is a very new technique, at least for Philippine audiences. Why not use silent films?

Night Creature: *Drawn from Philippine folklore, the Manananggal is an aswang (evil spirit) that can take the form of a beautiful woman, often linked to politics of oppression.*

Tell us about the creature from your film.
The main villain of the film is this creature from Philippine folklore, the Manananggal – the counterpart to witches in our folklore. We have a lot of films about the Manananggal, and they all have their different take on how the creature looks and how it behaves. I wanted to show my take on the Manananggal, blending it with silent films, how it would appear in the silent film world. In my film, they basically recover this horror film, which contains this creature, the Manananggal.

How does the Manananggal correspond with the lost silent films of the Philippines?
Many of the first silent films here in the Philippines were made by foreigners, produced here when we were heavily under American rule. Right after the Filipino-American War, we were developing new technologies, and we got a lot of stuff from the Americans – education, a lot of developing stuff, but at the same time, we had that oppression. In a way, this was also my way of hearkening back to the era of the American occupation, by using that feature and its relation to silent films in general. The Manananggal are also symbols of feminist resistance. Philippine folklore and politics are very much intertwined, like how the past, the present, and the future are all intertwined. And I guess these creatures, these eternal folklore creatures, will always be symbols of oppression in any era, in every era.

What Filipino horror movies would you recommend to people who haven't watched any?
If you're going to watch Filipino horror films, another unique aspect of ours compared with other horror films and global cinemas is we're very Catholic-centric. Many of our films are usually themed with our spirituality and religion in general. I think Erik Matti's films are interesting. There's *Seklusyon*. Or more experimentally, the films of Dodo Dayao as well. *Midnight in a Perfect World*, his film, is something that hearkens back to martial law in a way. One of our rising filmmakers now is Kenneth Dagatan, and I think he's doing another horror feature right now. His last one, *In My Mother's Skin*, was also interesting. It's interesting because, again, the Philippines has a lot of these periods of oppression, and his last film was about the Japanese occupation during World War II.

What do you hope* Posthouse *audiences come away with most of all?
I've always been telling myself making this horror film, you should only have one clear goal or objective in that your film needs to be scary, and that's all I care about. As a first-time filmmaker, I know I have a lot to prove. It does have to be true to [Filipino cinema] in a way, but first and foremost, I wanted it to be scary.

WANNA SEE SOMETHING FREAKY? WHY NOT ADD SOME TRICK 'R TREAT TO YOUR VACATION PLANS WITH THIS HANDY GUIDE TO THIRTEEN MUST-VISIT AMERICAN DESTINATIONS FOR THE MORBIDLY INCLINED, PERSONALLY SELECTED BY THE GALS 'N' GHOULS AT RUE MORGUE!
HORROR
USA
A DARK TOUR OF AMERICA
By Jenn Adams, Adam Lucas, Payton McCarty-Simas, Sean Plummer, Megan Poczos, Jeff Szpirglas and William J. Wright

CONEY ISLAND CIRCUS SIDESHOW

Brooklyn, New York

New York City holds much in store for the discerning horror fan, and we're not just talking about the *Ghostbusters* firehouse, or the freaky Elmos in Times Square. If you're feeling brave enough to venture past Broadway, you can take the D, Q, N, or F trains to Coney Island, where the crowds and noise will max out your senses. But keep your eyes peeled for 1208 Surf Avenue, home of the Coney Island Circus Sideshow, the last permanently housed sideshow of its kind in the States. With vintage placards outside advertising "weird women," "snakeology," and "creep show at the freak show," the frontage of the building alone is worth a photo op. Thankfully, this modern iteration of the classic sideshow is less of an exploitive affair, with a focus shifting toward inclusion rather than "otherness" – family-friendly entertainment with fire-eaters and sword-swallowers that still amaze with their unusual feats, without demeaning or ostracizing the performers. The sideshow operates continuously all day long, so you're unlikely to miss something amazing going on inside. Body horror-themed cabaret and burlesque, classic horror film screenings, vaudeville acts, and an annual Miss Coney Island Pageant suggest a calendar that aims to embrace vintage vibes (and well-positioned pasties). Given the colourful nature of the acts and surroundings, it also hosts a lot of seasonal events, such as the annual Mermaid Parade (the largest art parade of its kind in the USA) attracting thousands of spectators. Beyond the Circus Sideshow, Coney Island also offers plenty of retro thrills, including the Luna Park Fun House dating back to the early 1900s with mirror mazes, dark corridors, and optical tricks. And although those Times Square Elmos are pretty creepy, nothing beats the ever-smiling Coney Island logo. **JS**

GRAVEFACE MUSEUM

Savannah, Georgia

Sleepy Savannah, Georgia, is steeped in Revolutionary and Civil War history, but tourists with an interest in the darker corners of Americana should visit the city's Graveface Museum, focused on "all things unusual, macabre, unique and mysterious." Founder Ryan Graveface opened the museum, which is housed in a former tobacco factory, on Valentine's Day 2020, just weeks before COVID-19 shut everything down. He was about to give up the business when a visitor's TikTok went viral, resulting in lineups that continue today.

Visitors who find the back-alley entrance are greeted by taxidermied animals they are warned not to pet. Next is the Roadside America room, which is accessed by walking through a papier-mâché Satan head. Guides discuss the roadside attractions that populated America's backroads in the 1940s and '50, and fantastical creatures like conjoined lambs and Clementine the five-legged cow help supervise the proceedings.

There are two main exhibits that focus more on true crime, but with attention paid to their resonance in genre cinema. "The Ed Gein Experience" is a ten- to fifteen-minute guided tour that is not kid-friendly. Displayed over two floors, the ground floor is a replica of Gein's house that depicts the "Hollywood" version of his crimes, including human skin lamps (his Wisconsin farm never had electricity). The second is devoted to original/never-before-seen photos from the case and the only piece of evidence left – a lock of an unidentified woman's hair attached to his truck keys. The other exhibit is devoted to John Wayne Gacy and houses his tax returns, the key to the crawlspace where he kept his victims, his death row prison log, and the world's largest public collection of his paintings.

If this all sounds like something of a bummer for a day trip, the folks at Graveface have thought of that – an arcade room contains horror games and pinball that are free to play with the price of admission, intended as a "perfect palette cleanser after deep diving into some of these dark parts of humanity." So, dive deep, just don't expect to emerge unaffected… **SP**

HOLLYWOOD FOREVER CEMETERY

Los Angeles, California

In *Under the Silver Lake*, David Robert Mitchell's treatise on the city of Los Angeles and the psyche-fracturing effects of masculinist paranoia-fuelled disaffection in the digital age, a young man (played by Andrew Garfield) finds himself dosed with LSD and wandering around in a graveyard – but not just any graveyard. Beautiful underemployed actors, screenwriters, and artists wander between gravestones in costumes and makeup that melts in the warm night air; a horror movie flickers on a sheet in the background; unearthly music is playing "Bela Lugosi's Dead." I've spent years channelling the energy of that scene (give or take a tab of acid) every time I'm in LA.

Whenever I visit, I feel at my absolute eeriest popping in my headphones, blasting my Halloween playlist, and haunting Hollywood Forever Cemetery, no matter the season. This bastion of Old Hollywood glamour and decay is the perfect spot to spend a day paying respects to icons such as Vampira, looking for Valentino's ghost (Google it), catching up on some LA-set horror lit (CJ Leede's *Maeve Fly* is a personal fave), or trying to play with one of the cemetery's 50-some-odd feral cats (the site is also an animal sanctuary). The cemetery doubles as a concert venue and, as depicted in *Under the Silver Lake*, an outdoor movie theatre year-round. During spooky season, things get particularly ghastly: last year, the cemetery offered screenings of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Coraline* as well as hosting a Halloween dance party and jack-o'-lantern show. To cap off the festivities, Hollywood Forever throws an all-day Día de los Muertos celebration with a costume contest, projections on the mausoleums, and elaborate altars all around the cemetery.

Top off your trip with a visit to the Blind Rabbit speakeasy in nearby Anaheim and you've got yourself a real horrorshow of a day. Tell the dead that *Rue Morgue* sent ya! **PMCS**

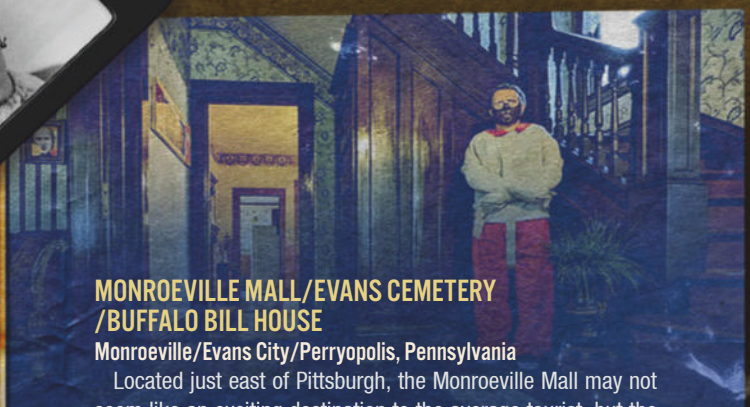
LIZZIE BORDEN HOUSE

Fall River, Massachusetts

Just a two-hour (ish) drive from Salem, Massachusetts, is another slice of horror history in Fall River. Keep your axes safely at home and book in advance at the Lizzie Borden House.

Yup, this is the actual site of the infamous double murder that took place on August 4, 1892, when Lizzie Borden reported to authorities that her father and stepmother had been hacked to death. Although the gruesome crime remains technically unsolved, Lizzie's name is forever associated with the murders and lives on in infamy, inspiring the moniker of at least one heavy metal act and rock opera, and keeping Fall River alive as a tourist destination. Available for both guided tours and overnight stays (yes, you can book Lizzie's actual bedroom), the Lizzie Borden House definitely puts all its chips on the table when it comes to bringing in tourists with a flair for the macabre (just no kids under seven years of age).

The house, purchased in 2021 by Lance Zaal, owner of US Ghost Adventures, maintains a period decor and theme. Victorian history dinners are available on weekends, where you can "enjoy a full course meal like the Bordens while piecing together the clues of their infamous murders." Both the house and surrounding grounds are available to host wedding events, and you can also book a guided tour of the nearby Oak Grove Cemetery, where the Bordens are buried and where their autopsies took place. The gift shop is a real cash-in on the murders, selling amongst other items, replica hatchets and novelty T-shirts bearing great dad jokes ("Don't Make Me Axe"), which admittedly is way better than the Miami Beach T-shirt your bubbie brought you back from her snowbird stay in Florida. Even the neighbouring coffee shop, Miss Lizzie's, is in on the morbid action, proclaiming itself "The Most Haunted Coffee Shop in the World!" **JS**



MONROEVILLE MALL/EVANS CEMETERY /BUFFALO BILL HOUSE

Monroeville/Evans City/Perryopolis, Pennsylvania

Located just east of Pittsburgh, the Monroeville Mall may not seem like an exciting destination to the average tourist, but the real ones know it's where George A. Romero filmed his 1978 masterpiece, *Dawn of the Dead*. And while some of the mall has been revamped over the years (sadly, the iconic JCPenney is gone), much of the interior still retains the late '70s charm of the film. In addition, the mall houses the Living Dead Museum, a well-curated exhibition of props, images, and artifacts from the film, along with Romero's other work in the genre – and yup, their gift store kicks ass, even selling bona fide relics from the mall featured in the film. Celebrity guests leave their own mark on this site of horror history by leaving a blood red handprint on the museum's "Maul of Fame." You can pick up a detailed map of the mall for a self-guided *DotD* tour, and the museum runs annual Living Dead conventions with cast and crew who are still around. While in town, be sure to stop at 361 Willow Hedge Drive, the home featured in Romero's *Creepshow* (1982).

Beyond Monroeville, Pittsburgh offers another Romero location just a half hour north of the city; Evans City Cemetery, better known as ground zero for the first zombie attack in *Night of the Living Dead*, contains the famous "Nicholas Kramer" tombstone that Barbra clutches at the beginning, offering fans the perfect opportunity for rubbings (bring paper and a piece of charcoal for a cool, free souvenir!) and "Coming to get you" photo ops. Navigating the cemetery is pretty easy and the landmarks of that opening scene are all still there (minus one tree that was torn out of the ground following a tornado).

Finally, should you tire of touring the zombiemania, perhaps you'd like to drive an hour south to crash at 8 Circle Street in Perryopolis, otherwise known as the filming location of Buffalo Bill's house from *Silence of the Lambs*. The site is now a working bed-and-breakfast with interiors preserved, and guests can book movie-themed packages for special occasions (fine chocolates paired with a nice chianti, naturally). Two-hour guided tours are also on offer for those brave enough to venture deep into the bowels of the house to a full-on faux basement dungeon set, complete with a vintage Singer sewing machine, a kimono, a disco ball, and all the lotion you'll ever need. **JS**

THE MÜTTER MUSEUM

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Philadelphia is many things: as the "birthplace of America," it's where the Declaration of Independence was signed, home to some really fabulous cheesesteak and maybe the world's best-filmed staircase where tourists can pretend to be Rocky Balboa. But it also houses the fascinating collection of medical specimens at The Mütter Museum, a place that seems torn from the frames of an as-of-yet-unfilmed David Cronenberg epic.

Long before modern audiences could thrill to the preserved human remains that make up the touring Body Worlds exhibitions, there was The Mütter: 18% of its collection consists of human remains, and the permanent collection boasts numerous grisly items on perpetual exhibition, such as the infamous "soap lady," a woman mummified through the process of saponification, mouth still agape after 140 years on the premises. There's also a collection of 139 skulls, a pair of conjoined livers, a series of over 2000 foreign bodies extracted from various throats and lungs, and by now you start to get a vibe of the place, which manages to be both coolly clinical and displaying a ghoulish grandeur.

Most of the items are displayed as tastefully as possible (given the material) behind glass cases in wooden cabinets in an open foyer dressed in red carpeting. While no photos are allowed of the items on display, their memories will be etched in your brain for a lifetime. Case in point – the "mega colon": a 2.4-metre-long length of lower intestine that was said to have contained 18 kg of fecal matter. Special events pop up on the calendar, such as chamber orchestra concerts, old horror movie screenings, and skull sketching sessions. Even if you can't visit in person, the comprehensive website includes virtual exhibits, and a series of informative podcasts with topics ranging from jaw necrosis to chimney sweep scrotums.

JS

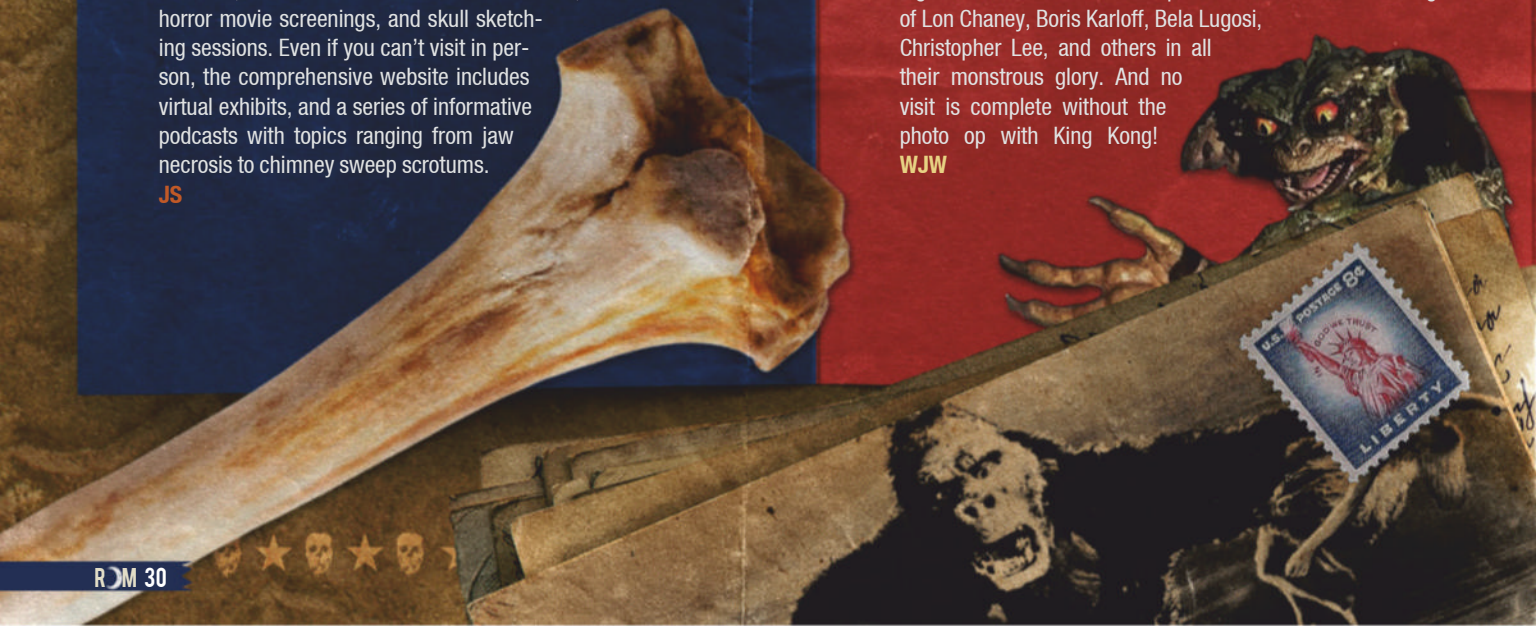
MUSEUM OF THE WEIRD

Austin, Texas

Long an oasis for oddballs, artists, and outsiders in a state known for conservative values, Austin, Texas, is united under the famous rallying cry of "Keep Austin Weird," and in the centre of this colourful city is an attraction that epitomizes this ethos like no other. Combining classic sideshow ballyhoo with the offbeat charm of mid-century roadside attractions, the Museum of the Weird is located in the back of Lucky Lizard Curios & Gifts at 412 East 6th Street. Initially founded by the shop's owners, Steve and Veronica Busti, as a repository for "oddities in the store [that] were just too weird and too interesting to justify selling," the museum invites visitors to gaze upon such curiosities and classic sideshow fare as Fiji mermaids, fur-bearing trout, and shrunken heads. And then there's the museum's crown jewel: since 2013, the Museum of the Weird has been home to the Minnesota Iceman. Purported to be the "missing link" between modern humanity and the Neanderthals (and memorably featured in a 1994 episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*), the attraction is one of the most famous hoaxes in history and toured North America throughout the 1960s and '70s.

But the wall-to-wall oddities don't end there. See a mummified digit alleged to be the trigger finger of Mexican outlaw Pancho Villa! See such freaks of nature as two-headed chickens and a cyclops pig! See an actual trephined skull! From plaster sasquatch tracks and detailed recreations of cryptids and aliens to screen-used movie props from *Gremlins* and *Tales From the Darkside* to live sideshow performers, Austin's Museum of the Weird is a patchwork quilt of the unusual and bizarre, culminating in a "chamber of horrors" packed with realistic wax effigies of Lon Chaney, Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee, and others in all their monstrous glory. And no visit is complete without the photo op with King Kong!

WJW



SKELETON KEY ODDITORIUM

Portland, Oregon

Located at 939 SW 10th Avenue in the heart of Portland's thriving arts district, the Skeleton Key Odditorium is not for everyone (present company excluded, naturally), and that's just fine with owners Amber Victoria and Daniel Debris. Part museum of the macabre and part curiosity shop, this eclectic establishment features a leisurely, self-guided tour through topics ranging from vampire lore and funerary practices to witchcraft, magick, and the dark side of local legends and folklore.

Horror and history converge with rotating exhibits that include a collection of allegedly haunted items, spirit boards, the history of the tarot, Frankenstein's laboratory, secret societies, circus sideshows, and an exploration of the tragic death of cereal magnate Charles W. Post, among many others. Spanning 2500 square feet in the historic and appropriately creepy Ivy Press Building (erected in 1917), The Odditorium also features specially curated showcases from visual artists who dabble in the dark side, such as Matthew Hopkins of Nightmerriment, a creator of deliciously devilish dolls, wands, and brooms. And for those who prefer to get in on the spooky action, the museum is also host to the occasional D.I.Y. workshop, where patrons can make their own poppets, learn to mix potions, or summon the divine feminine.

No museum is complete without a gift shop, but don't expect the typical array of gaudy, overpriced keychains, coffee cups, and hats at the Skeleton Key: the proprietors warn patrons to "enter at their own discretion." As of this writing, Skeleton Key's vendor list includes over a dozen artists specializing in eerie ephemera and esoterica, including one-of-a-kind oddities and antiques; witchy, metaphysical items such as tarot cards and crystals; offbeat and unusual clothing; and original handcrafted treasures from local artisans. Pick up the ultimate "memento mori" from Northwest Oddities, which offers beautiful glass-domed tableaus of life and death constructed of bones, insects, and flowers, or treat yourself to a piece of "living art" from artisan Belmont Lowe, whose jewellery and trinkets are made from resin and real blood. **WJW**

STEPHEN KING TOUR

Bangor, Maine

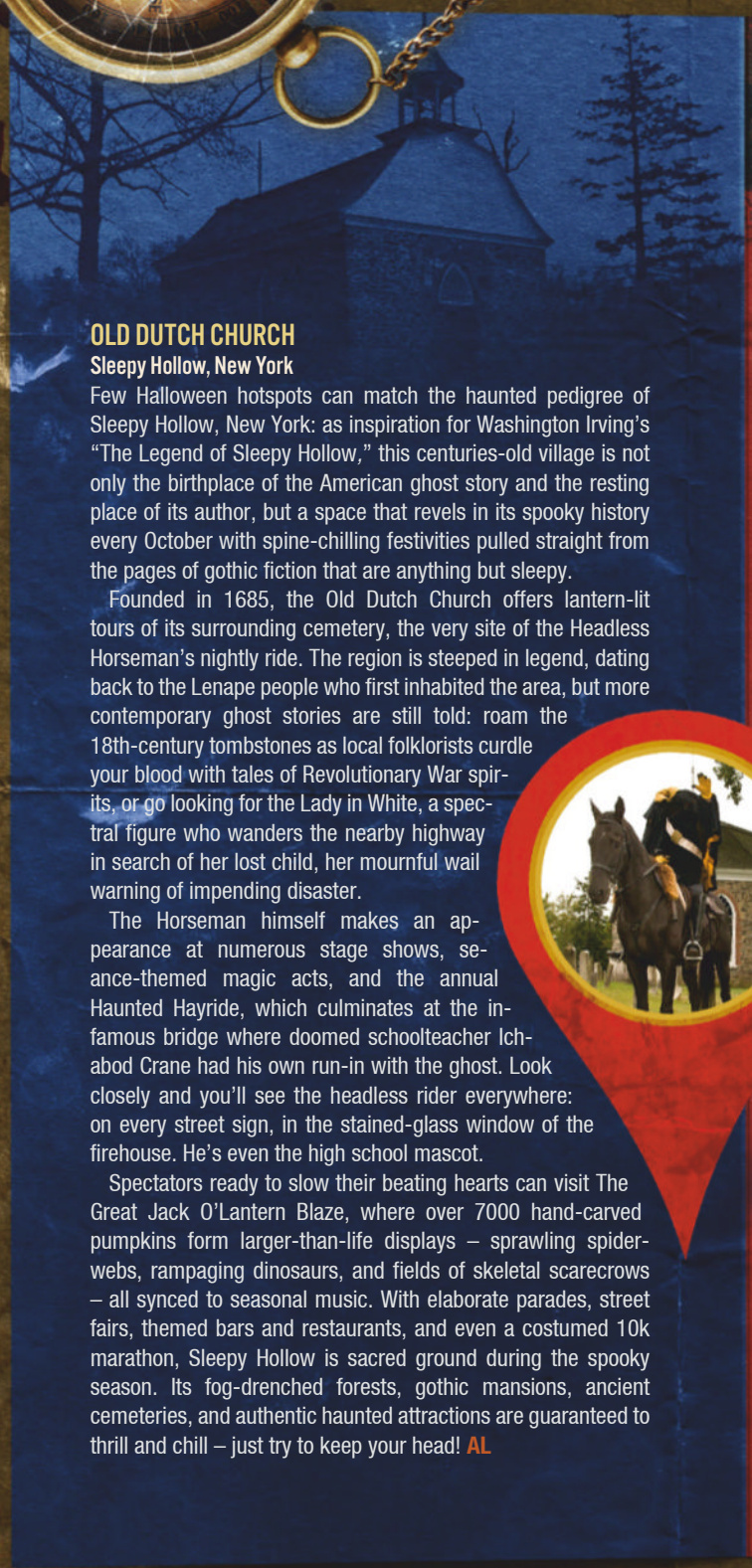
In Stephen King's *It*, the adult members of the Losers' Club return to Derry, Maine, having completely forgotten their epic childhood battle with Pennywise the Dancing Clown, but a series of walking tours reacquaint them with the tiny burg while uncovering memories of their frightening encounters. You too can be one such Loser and visit the locations that inspired each spine-chilling vignette of the massive story.

Book a trip with SK Tours of Maine and climb aboard a cozy minivan for a ride through town with a member of the Tinker family, owners of the original Betts Bookstore and each as knowledgeable a guide as you can possibly imagine. The SK Tour is a family affair and an acutely intimate one, to boot.

Not only is Bangor replete with sites described in Derry (the giant Paul Bunyan statue that terrorizes Richie Tozier, the Thomas Hill Standpipe said to harbour the ghosts of three drowned children, the canal where the murder of Adrian Mellon was inspired by a real-life hate crime, and more!), personal anecdotes from the host bring the lit legend right back down to earth.

In addition to the sites from books and movies (King insisted that 1989's *Pet Sematary* be shot in his hometown, and the tour will take you to the very site where he made his cameo in that film), equal attention is paid to the many ways in which the Kings (Stephen and wife Tabitha) have given back to their community. The Bangor Public Library, for example, which inspired many of *It*'s most harrowing scenes, underwent a massive renovation co-funded by the Kings (with an extensive horror section, natch). But the best part is that neither the library nor the many parks, recreational sites, and municipal landmarks the Kings helped fund bear their name.

Far from the mere tourist trap it could have easily become in the wrong hands, the SK Tour brings the warm and fuzzies along with the thrills and chills – and yes, of course, it wraps up at the author's famous former home for the crucial selfie in front of the bat gates. Whether you arrive in Bangor a King fan or not, you'll certainly leave as one. **JA**



OLD DUTCH CHURCH

Sleepy Hollow, New York

Few Halloween hotspots can match the haunted pedigree of Sleepy Hollow, New York: as inspiration for Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," this centuries-old village is not only the birthplace of the American ghost story and the resting place of its author, but a space that revels in its spooky history every October with spine-chilling festivities pulled straight from the pages of gothic fiction that are anything but sleepy.

Founded in 1685, the Old Dutch Church offers lantern-lit tours of its surrounding cemetery, the very site of the Headless Horseman's nightly ride. The region is steeped in legend, dating back to the Lenape people who first inhabited the area, but more contemporary ghost stories are still told: roam the 18th-century tombstones as local folklorists curdle your blood with tales of Revolutionary War spirits, or go looking for the Lady in White, a spectral figure who wanders the nearby highway in search of her lost child, her mournful wail warning of impending disaster.

The Horseman himself makes an appearance at numerous stage shows, seance-themed magic acts, and the annual Haunted Hayride, which culminates at the infamous bridge where doomed schoolteacher Ichabod Crane had his own run-in with the ghost. Look closely and you'll see the headless rider everywhere: on every street sign, in the stained-glass window of the firehouse. He's even the high school mascot.

Spectators ready to slow their beating hearts can visit The Great Jack O'Lantern Blaze, where over 7000 hand-carved pumpkins form larger-than-life displays – sprawling spiderwebs, rampaging dinosaurs, and fields of skeletal scarecrows – all synced to seasonal music. With elaborate parades, street fairs, themed bars and restaurants, and even a costumed 10k marathon, Sleepy Hollow is sacred ground during the spooky season. Its fog-drenched forests, gothic mansions, ancient cemeteries, and authentic haunted attractions are guaranteed to thrill and chill – just try to keep your head! **AL**

THE STANLEY HOTEL

Estes Park, Colorado

It would be difficult to find a horror fan who hasn't heard of the (in)famous Stanley Hotel. A true bucket-list spot for fans of *The Shining*, the real-life inspiration for Stephen King's fictional Overlook Hotel is a hotbed for paranormal activity, but there's plenty for the living to do as well.

Tours are a popular starting place for activities at The Stanley, and visitors can choose between options ranging from purely historical to ragingly paranormal. Family friendly (mostly) and open to the public, the tours do not require a booked room with the hotel, making them the perfect option for dipping your toe into the spooky Stanley experience.

For the bravest and most dedicated horror fans, the Stanley's "Spirited Stays" allow full immersion into the haunted experience, where guests can book any of the purportedly haunted hotel rooms: Room 217, the actual room Stephen King was staying in when inspired to write *The Shining* novel; *Ghost Hunters* favourite Room 401; as well as Room 407 and Room 428. The haunted rooms book up fast, so if you're interested in visiting, make sure you book your spooky stay well in advance!

But of course, the real action happens after dark. Tucked under the original carriage house of the hotel lies the secret Underground theatre, host to myriad performances – not all of them spooky. But the late-night *13, A Seance at the Stanley* promises a "theatrical séance experience" guided by the resident apparitionist known only as Hannibal. Adjacent to the hotel is an event space where more mature levels of entertainment include the Devotchka Annual Costume Ball, a devilish masquerade of dancing, live music, a costume contest, and the SlaVic Sisters Macabre Circus Sideshow, exclusive to guests of the hotel over the age of 21 and, of course, the annual Halloween Shining Ball where costumes associated with anything Stephen King are strongly encouraged.

Visit if you dare, and maybe you'll have your own paranormal encounter to add to the long list of Stanley Hotel haunts. **MP**

VAMPA VAMPIRE & PARANORMAL MUSEUM

Doylestown, Pennsylvania

Thanks to legendary filmmaker George A. Romero and his zeitgeist-changing *Night of the Living Dead*, Pennsylvania has become something of a mecca for horror fans. However, if your taste for all things terrifying leans more toward the cosmic and mystical than the apocalyptic and symbolic, the Keystone State still has something for you.

Situated on a bucolic, five-acre parcel of land in Bucks County, just north of Philadelphia, the VAMPA Vampire & Paranormal Museum is dedicated to "exploring the intersection of the supernatural, folklore, myth, and faith through the ages as expressed through art." The Museum was opened in 2023 by chief curator Edmondo Crimi and houses his own collection of hundreds of macabre works of art and paranormal artifacts – many of which were collected by Crimi himself during his 40-year career as an art dealer. Among the authentic horrors awaiting eager visitors are a hand-carved, 19th-century "exorcism chair" (complete with leather restraints, manacles, and "demonic energy"), an ornate skeleton rocking chair (allegedly once owned by Vincent Price), and occult items from around the world, ranging from spirit boards to African fetish masks. Most unique of all is Crimi's collection of rare vampire-slaying kits, part of the museum's permanent "Art of the Kill" exhibit; not only are the hand-carved crucifixes and stake-and-hammer sets on display gorgeous to behold, but Crimi's knowledgeable commentary on their historical relevance as items of faith and folklore really bring them to (un)life.

VAMPA also holds various special events throughout the year, including tours of its basement "cleansing room," which features the museum's most diabolical objects not on regular display. But if all that is too much for the kiddos, turn them loose on VAMPA's outside dinosaur park, or take a break to stroll the Zen garden and marvel at the beauty of the peacocks roaming the grounds. Above all else, be warned: Crimi takes the museum and its mission very seriously, so enter with an open mind and a respectful heart. **WJW**

WINCHESTER MYSTERY HOUSE

San Jose, California

Whether or not Mark Twain ever actually said "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story," that proverb certainly applies to the notorious Winchester Mystery House. Located in San Jose, California, the primarily Gothic mansion is infamous for its size (160 rooms over 24,000 square feet), its architectural eccentricities (including stairways going nowhere and doors that lead to fifteen-foot drops), and its mostly self-created legend as "The Most Haunted House in History."

The house was home for many years to Sarah Pardee Winchester (1839-1922), the rich widow of William Wirt Winchester of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Legend has it that Sarah's guilt over the multitudes who had died as a result of the guns her husband's company manufactured led her to purchase the house (known then as Llanada Villa) and commission unnecessary renovations that had it under construction around the clock for the next 36 years. Her expansion requests became increasingly bizarre and irrational over time with tasks being started and abandoned when Sarah changed her mind, resulting in a labyrinthine maze, apparently so that the many ghosts haunting the property would be trapped by the ongoing construction and leave her be.

Among the many colourful (but unproven) rumours of Winchester House are ghostly music heard by locals, Sarah's own fascination with the number thirteen (resulting in that number of bathrooms and bedrooms), and her holding nightly seances between midnight and 2 a.m. These stories were likely perpetuated by locals gossiping about their wealthy and reclusive neighbour (not to mention the companies that have kept the property open as a popular tourist attraction in the century-plus since Sarah's death), but the sprawling mansion remains a staggeringly spooky architectural curiosity that's well worth a visit. The Winchester Mystery House is open for daily group tours and private events, including (shotgun?) weddings. **SP**

THE CURSED FILM – THAT MOVIE THAT, WHEN WATCHED, CAN ACTUALLY KILL YOU (OR WORSE) – HAS BEEN WHISPERED ABOUT SINCE THE DAWN OF CINEMA. MORE SPOKEN ABOUT THAN SEEN, THE EVIL MOVIE IS NOW THE BASIS OF A GROWING LITERARY OBSESSION

CURSED FILMS, CURSED WORDS

BY DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

THE IDEA THAT MOVING IMAGES ARE SOMEHOW CONNECTED TO EVIL IS AN OLD ONE AND PREDATES CINEMA BY MANY CENTURIES. THE GNOSTICS HAD THEIR "FLICK-BOOKS," whose rapidly turned pages created the illusion of movement within. Those were distant ancestors to the zoetrope, which eventually led to the Lumière Brothers' projector. And although their name translates to "light," some believed that something darker was behind the mechanism – that moving images could themselves be possessed by malignant forces with the power to corrupt their beholder.

Enter horror movies: sometimes the genre itself was considered "a portal to something demonic" (to quote a certain *Full House* star), while for others the subject matter was deemed evil, e.g. William Friedkin's realistically depicted Devil in *The Exorcist* (1973). In either case, the idea is that by merely watching a horror film people become vulnerable to subliminal influences that can imperil their lives… and souls. From Hideo Nakata's frightening *Ringu* (1998) to the more recent *Antrum* (2018) and beyond, countless directors have toyed with the question: what would an intentionally evil film look like? The film whose influence works like a curse, going beyond temporary chills all the way to altering one's perception, behaviour, sanity…

Theodore Roszak, the famous theoretician of counterculture, notably tackled the subject in his 1991 novel *Flicker*, which took up the notion of evil Gnostics and turned the entire horror cinema into an accessory to malign intentions. It was a heady (and talky) concoction of secret societies, Freemasons, Cathars, Illuminati, exotic episodes from history, conspiracies, shady priests, mysterious deaths, ciphers, codes and symbols, all related to the secret history of cinema, and especially horror cinema. He created the prototype for many later plots dealing with an inquisitive person searching for a forgotten director and/or his lost, legendary, infamous film. In time, the concept got many variations, from a relatively straightforward retelling of *Flicker* in John Carpenter's *Masters of Horror* episode *Cigarette Burns* to dozens of Japanese found-footage "cursed videos" of the kind that Kôji Shiraishi mastered (e.g. *Really! Cursed Video: The Movie*, 2003).

And while the nature of these cursed films and their ways of affecting others became more varied, the trope is as strong as ever in genre literature, as exemplified by three contemporary examples from modern masters of the craft. Last year, three-time Bram Stoker Award winner Paul Tremblay tackled the theme in his novel *Horror Movie* (Morrow, 2024), where a group of young filmmakers summon a monster by making an all-too-true low-budget horror about… summoning a monster. Then, this June, Valancourt Books finally reissued *Throat Sprockets* (1994) by *Video Watchdog*'s Tim Lucas – a J.G. Ballardian investigation of a kinky pathology of tomorrow, where the widespread fashion of "sprocketing," or shallow biting of necks, was inspired by a mysterious fetishist film. And finally, author Michael Wehunt has his debut novel *The October Film Haunt* published by St. Martin's Press this fall. It deals with a strange horror film that caused at least one death initially, and is now poised for its sequel…

Rue Morgue caught up with these writers to investigate the allure of films that kill, and the fictions that tap on them…

Why is the horror genre so meta, so preoccupied with stories about storytelling? Why do we have so many fictions (novels) about fictions (films) as if they existed?

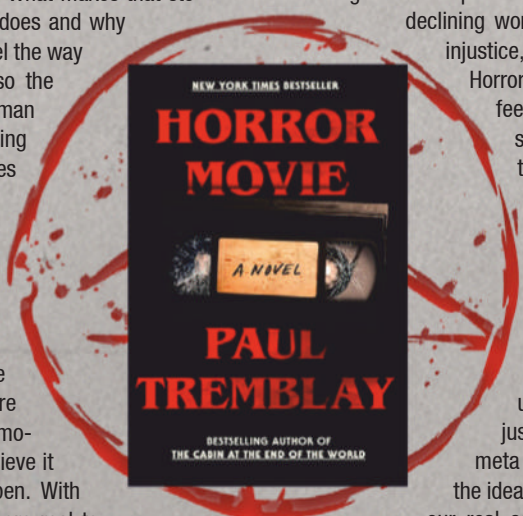
Tim Lucas: In recent years, I acquired someone's Lovecraft collection and have been very impressed with that, and it's the body of work that probably best answers your question. Lovecraft embeds his text with footnotes and quotations from nonexistent works in Latin, and it is all to the purpose of building an alternative reality in which the reader must believe. Because of writers like Lovecraft and Borges, we have this reference point that allows writers to make their inventions seem more believable because they are surrounded by other inventions. Modern-day readers feel they've moved beyond fairy tales, sketchy pretend stories that lack dimension, and they demand a more realistic presentation, a sense of three dimensions. It's really no different than Stephen King setting his novels in a world with lots of commercial reference points like McDonalds and Nikes.

The Medium Is The Monster: *Genre films as varied as Hideo Nakata's* ***Ring*** *and Michael Haneke's* ***Funny Games*** *blur the boundary between film and reality.*

"THE STORIES THAT SCARE AND AFFECT ME THE MOST ARE THE ONES THAT FEEL MORE REAL AND, IN THE MOMENT, I CAN FULLY BELIEVE IT COULD ACTUALLY HAPPEN."

-PAUL TREMBLAY

Paul Tremblay: For the stories that I reread or rewatch repeatedly, there's an emotional connection that demands further exploration in attempt to answer questions like, "Why am I so drawn to the story? What makes that story work the way it does and why does it make me feel the way I feel?" There's also the weird, but very human impulse to wanting your favourite stories to be more tangible, more real. I can't speak for all horror fans, but the stories that scare and affect me the most are the ones that feel more real and, in the moment, I can fully believe it could actually happen. With the make-it-feel-more-real-to-be-scary in mind, and because of the inherent transgression of horror, I think the creators are often viewed as inextricable from the story, thus making the story and horror more real.



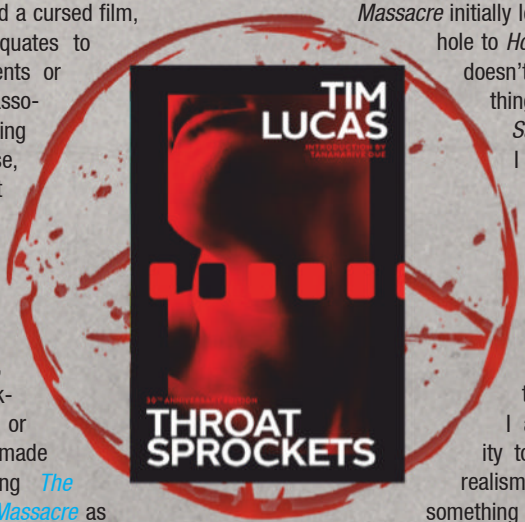
Michael Wehunt: Horror fiction is often appealing as an escape from the real horrors of a declining world, the self, society, injustice, war, technology. Horror and struggle can feel like our default state too much of the time, but at least demons and vampires aren't real. A horror movie's just a fake production, with actors and cameras all existing at a safe remove from us. A horror novel's just words. But the meta element introduces the idea of the real world and our real selves intruding upon those layers of horror fiction, making us question the fictional nature – and what can be more frightening than that? You sink into a horror

story and start to get the sense that it's infected with reality, and you yourself might be a part of it. The fourth wall is our safety net, but if it becomes fragile…

Which brings us to the trope of the "cursed film." What attracts you to it, in particular?

TL: One of my favourite novelists is Alain Robbe-Grillet, who innovated a form of fiction that proceeded from what he called "generators" (that is, objects) rather than characters, and I'd always had this idea in mind of writing a novel about something innocuous that produced a pandemic result. Because, at that particular time, I was writing a column called "Video Watchdog" for various magazines (it became a magazine in its own right in 1990), I was seeing a lot of bootleg horror tapes in those days and I was finding in particular that the films of a director named Jesús Franco were radically changing my way of thinking about films, and they were often shocking in terms of erotic ideas. I had a friend who worked in advertising, and I had my own experience of attending movies in different kinds of theatres as a critic, and I was witnessing the death and demolition of old movie palaces and seeing the social ceremony of packed houses being reduced to people watching more and more explicit movies in their apartments, in solitude, from prints that were sometimes barely watchable. That social decay was something I wanted to document, but in a deadpan satirical way.

PT: I was interested in the lore, or what made a film be considered a cursed film, which generally equates to there being accidents or deaths on set or associated with the filming timeline. Of course, in real life, I don't believe in the supernatural, and the films that are "cursed" are the ones where life and accidents, statistically speaking, just happen, or the set wasn't made safe enough. Using *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as an example of a shoot where everyone involved took risks (financial, physical, etc.), I wanted to know what drove people to cross the line (wherever that line might be drawn) to collectively create art. I wanted to explore if the risks were worth the result. A movie, as opposed to a book, has a collective will to be served and fed, and I imagined it as its own kind of monster.



MW: I'm fascinated by this trope in the sense that a film could in and of itself be an occult ritual, with the viewer being a participant in the ritual through their viewing. If the occult employed a work of art and online discourse to perform a ritual, the act of belief would be necessary to facilitate it. An urban legend would grow (think Slender Man), and *belief* would spread. The film would be more than a film only with the viewer's help. In our current era, many people will eagerly believe things so outlandish that they might as well be occult, so I wondered: what is the difference, in modern, tangible terms, between fact and belief?

> "I REWATCHED THE *SCREAM* SERIES TO REMIND MYSELF OF WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE A SLASHER FAN WATCHING A SLASHER AND HAVING THAT MIRROR-LIKE RESONANCE BE ACKNOWLEDGED BY THE FILM AND ALMOST BECOME SYMBIOTIC."
>
> -MICHAEL WEHUNT

What cinematic and/or literary influences did you draw from?

PT: Watching a video of Walter Chaw and John Darnielle discussing *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* initially led me down a rabbit hole to *Horror Movie*. My book doesn't have much of anything to do with *Chain Saw* story-wise, but I wanted the movie in *HM* to feel like I felt when I first saw *Chain Saw*. The book is dedicated to the great Peter Straub. Aside from his brilliant sentence-level writing, I admire Peter's ability to root his stories in realism and then just have something be a little bit off in a way that's utterly terrifying, again, because it feels so real.

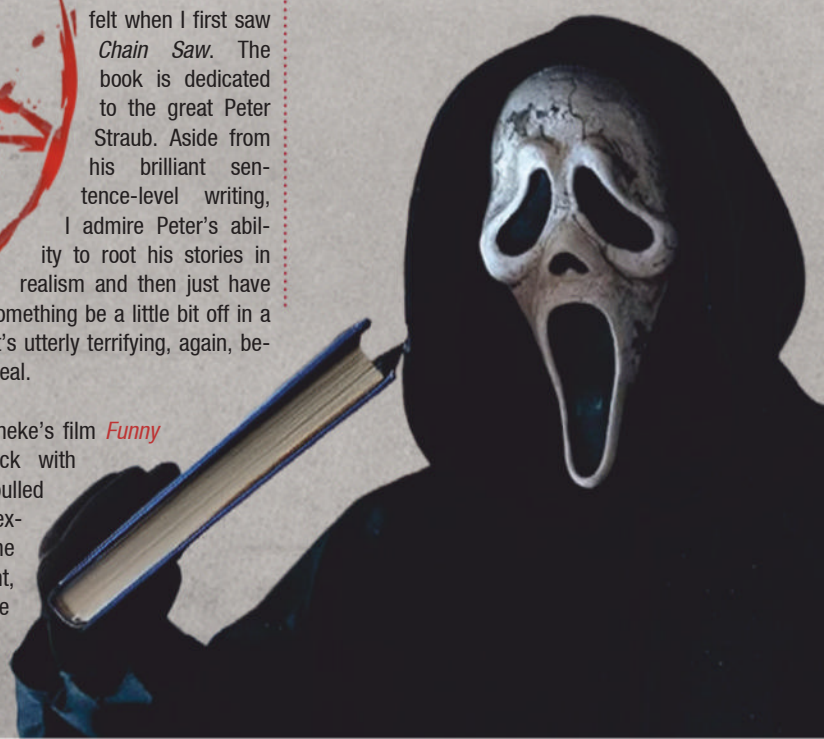
MW: Michael Haneke's film *Funny Games* has stuck with me because he pulled off something extraordinary. In one particular moment, Haneke breaks the fourth wall in a shocking way, making the viewer question the nature of the fiction they're experiencing. That moment pulsed throughout *The October Film Haunt*. What if my novel's premise threatened to do this? The online culture depicted around the horror director Stanislas Cordova in Marisha Pessl's novel *Night Film* and Pessl's powerful mythmaking were inspiring, just as more obvious touchstones like *Ringu* and the virality of technology, *The Blair Witch Project*, and occult and/or cosmic spaces.

TL: Anything I'd ever read and loved had become part of me, and I had spent all those years of learning how to write fiction eradicating all conscious mimicry from my work. It was with *Throat Sprockets* that I felt I'd finally found my own voice. The one "gimmick" (if you will) that I borrowed from something I'd read at that time was the use of second-person narration, which I took from Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, which forced the reader to identify with the protagonist.

Are there stories and novels on this subject that should be better known?

MW: The short story "each thing i show you is a piece of my death" by Gemma Files and Stephen J. Barringer is my benchmark for truly effective, genuinely frightening found-footage/metafictional horror, and it specifically concerns cursed films. Joel Lane's novella *The Witnesses Are Gone* is a very close second – it's unnerving, and the language and imagery brilliantly keep the reader trapped in a filmic trance.

PT: Gemma Files' *Experimental Film* and Ellen Datlow's anthology *Final Cuts*. While not quite cursed film stories, I highly recommend Kae Wilson's cannibal exploitation exploration *We Eat Our Own* and John Darnielle's *Universal Harvester*.



The Blair Witch Project

TL: When *Throat Sprockets* appeared, I heard from a number of people suggesting I should read *Flicker*. I tried, but I knew so much about the actual history of horror cinema that Roszak's rewriting of that history prevented me from getting into his story or having any patience with it. I read Ramsey Campbell's *Ancient Images* maybe seven or eight years ago, because I'd heard that he'd invented this "lost" Karloff/Lugosi film and written a story around it. Although I liked the novel, the "lost" film was more the subject of a character's search and I didn't think it projected the strongest personality in the book, which to me came from the story's sense of landscape. It struck me as an example of folk-horror more than anything else.

What kind of research did you do for your novel?

PT: I interviewed a handful of filmmaking friends and cohorts (David Slade, Alejandro Brugués, Natasha Kermani, Brea Grant), who were immensely helpful. Three of those four also read an early draft of the book to check if the movie side of things read as somewhat authentic. Text-wise, I heavily referenced *Chain Saw Confidential* by Gunnar Hansen and Robert Rodriguez's *Rebel Without a Crew*.

MW: I revisited a lot of favourites. Though *The October Film Haunt* is only part-slasher, I rewatched the *Scream* series to remind myself of what it feels like to be a slasher fan watching a slasher and having that mirror-like resonance be acknowledged by the film and almost become symbiotic. I read about the Slender Man stabbings in Wisconsin in 2014 to inform my backstory, and I explored Reddit horror and creepypasta to more faithfully capture the strange passion of that fandom.

TL: None whatsoever. I'm an instinctual writer; I sit down without anything in mind except knowing that I need to get from here to there. I will start typing, just to open the valves (so to speak), and the words come. They are usually the right words, or in the direction of the right words, which are found if needed in the editing and proofreading. I understand that Ray Bradbury used to have a sign behind his typewriter that said "Don't Think!" – and I find this the most valuable advice I've ever heard in reference to creative writing.

How have the latest developments in technology affected the cursed film trope?

TL: I consciously designed the novel *Throat Sprockets* so there was a noticeable gap between the penultimate chapter and the last, in which the protagonist is a much older man in a much-changed world. I put the gap there because there are indications of "missing scenes" throughout the book, as there were in the movie it's about – I was making a deliberate "meta" step so that the book *Throat Sprockets*, about the movie *Throat Sprockets*, might be confused by the reader as a literary form of the movie *Throat Sprockets*. But when Valancourt Books showed interest in publishing a new 30th anniversary edition of the book, I seized the opportunity to write a new chapter that filled in the missing 30 years of the story, and [it chronicles] the evolution of home video from the introduction of DVD, Blu-ray, and 4K.

"MODERN-DAY READERS FEEL THEY'VE MOVED BEYOND FAIRY TALES, SKETCHY PRETEND STORIES THAT LACK DIMENSION, AND THEY DEMAND A MORE REALISTIC PRESENTATION, A SENSE OF THREE DIMENSIONS."

-TIM LUCAS

PT: That a cursed film can much more easily end up playing on a screen in our homes or on our laptops feels like a uniquely modern horror, and perhaps an inescapable one. The VCR tape of *Ringu* is not quite a cursed film in the sense we've discussed, but I think it's an early example of a story that addressed the technology advancement of a cursed film within the home-viewing revolution. Similarly, and set within our now time of surveillance and voyeurism, *Red Rooms*' snuff films exist on the dark web, and it brilliantly prods at the human curiosity and desire to watch terrible, unspeakable things simply because we can.

MW: We carry tiny film studios in our pockets now, so a cursed movie can potentially be shared and built upon by the public at a pandemic rate – the cursed film can even depend upon that ability to spread it like a virus, open an occult doorway, etc. Technology is also making hoaxes much easier. Thirty years after *Ringu*, torrent sites would make an obscure cursed film accessible to anyone. Message boards like Reddit can kindle urban legends rapidly. Social media thrives on virality.

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DEVIL'S Food

BY ROCCO T. THOMPSON

MIGHT WE INTEREST YOU IN A PILE OF PUFF-PASTRY INTESTINES STUFFED WITH SUCCULENT SAUSAGE? HOW ABOUT A platter of barbecued bat wings (hold the bat)? Perhaps what you need is a sip of a Corpse Reviver – guaranteed to make you the "afterlife" of any party! That's just barely cracking the crypt on the bloody bounty of morbid morsels and creepy cocktails ready to tantalize and terrify ravenous goths and gore-mands alike come witching season in *Elvira's Cookbook from Hell*, stalking shelves this October from Grand Central Publishing.

Over her four-plus decades in the biz, Cassandra Peterson (a.k.a. Elvira, Mistress of the Dark) has not only conquered the world of movies (*Elvira: Mistress of the Dark*, *Elvira's Haunted Hills*) and music (*Elvira's Gravest Hits*), but has lent her name to everything from apparel to makeup kits to coffee-table books to office supplies, and more homewares than you can shake your two biggest pumpkins at. So, it's a genuine shocker that it took over 40 years for such a no-brainer as a cookbook to manifest.

"It's been a project I have wanted to do forever… literally!" Peterson says, taking a break from touching up her dog's mohawk to chat with *Rue Morgue*. "We could just never get any publisher who wanted to do it. They always wanted to make it a Halloween cookbook, and [those are] mostly geared towards children. I wanted to do one for all the goth adults that I get fan mail from."

"I THINK IT'S MORE OF AN INSPIRATION BOOK: IT'S THE LOOK, THE PRESENTATION OF THE WHOLE GOTH ENTERTAINMENT AND COOKING LIFESTYLE THAT IS OUT THERE."

– Elvira

And that flow of fan mail has hardly waned throughout 40 years, from Elvira's TV host days to becoming an indisputable pop culture icon. Cruising a wave of nostalgia toward the simpler, pre-internet pleasures of the 1980s, the sassy lassie with the classy chassis has seen a real surge in popularity over the last decade or so, going from a Halloween queen to being in demand year-round. Devotees know that Elvira is no longer just a character to be rolled out for spooky season – she's a brand, and Peterson is seizing her moment to be the "Martha Stewart of the Macabre" for adults with discerning palates and moribund style.

Peterson's love of cooking goes way back to her pre-Elvira days as an erstwhile singer for Italian rock bands I Latins 80 and The Snails in the 1970s, mastering the art of SpaghettiOs on the road. Later on, she would throw dinner parties for some of Hollywood and the music industry's biggest and brightest, including Chrissie Hynde from The Pretenders and k.d. lang.

"Back in the early 2000s, I was hosting parties; cooking [and] decorating for them – I mean, really, I thought I was freaking Martha Stewart," she says with a laugh. "I would design the table layout. I would be down at six in the morning at the flower mart in LA, picking out all the flowers. I think when you have a group of friends over, it's more than just throwing a pizza on the table and saying, 'Have at it.' People appreciate it if you put some time and love into it."

Hostess with the mostess, much? Given all this, it seems that a cookbook chock-ablock with ideas for throwing your own blood-curdling soiree was always on the table for the Mistress of the Dark, but it took waiting for just the right collaborator to make it work. Peterson found her perfect match in Kim Laidlaw, whose bibliography includes a casketload of spooky cookbooks themed around *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *The Twilight Saga*, and even *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

"She had done all these great projects, and she was totally into it," raves Peterson. "She freaking loved doing this book and she was a delight to work with."

Elvira's Cookbook from Hell is organized according to occasion – from A Beastly Bloody Brunch to Creepy Cocktail Party to Goth Wedding Dinner and A Romantic Graveside Picnic – with thoughtfully curated food and drink options to leave your guests shrieking for more. As for the meat-averse, she's got you covered. Elvira may not be one to shirk

Spooky Chic: *Perfect for Halloween (or any other time of year), Elvira's new book has detailed instructions for spooky snacks, drinks, and crafts, peppered with her trademark cheeky wit.*

from pulverized livestock in its own natural casings (horrific) but Cassandra Peterson is a longtime friend of animals, and has ensured that there are plenty of vegetarian and vegan options on the menu as well. Alongside the tipple and nosh, readers will find a recurring section called Elvira's Creepy Crafts, where they can learn to make Spiky Napkin Holders, Zombie Wedding Cake Toppers, Spiderlace Coasters, and more to bring any occasion to life (er, death).

Elvira's Cookbook from Hell was very much a collaborative effort, with Peterson working hand-in-disembodied-hand with Laidlaw to make sure every word on every page oozed with that signature Elvira wit and charm.

"This was completely different from writing my memoir [*Yours Cruelly, Elvira*]," Peterson asserts. "I wanted my [recipe] introductions to really sound like me and my voice. [After] we wrote everything, it was a real panic moment. I honestly woke up in the middle of the night going, 'It doesn't sound like me!'"

Peterson, who has famously been a lover of old-school macabre humour since seeing William Castle's *House on Haunted Hill* as a child, has always done her utmost to pay tribute to the greats while giving Elvira her own unique flavour of punnery and wicked wordplay.

"I was afraid it sounded like Boris Karloff or Bela Lugosi," she says. "It had the spooky vibe, but it just didn't have the Elvira voice, so I went back through the whole damn book and wrote it from top to bottom again."

The biggest surprise for Peterson in conjuring up *Elvira's Cookbook from Hell* was just how large a team such an endeavour requires, including food stylists and photographers, as well as, of course, having to set aside time to test and retest every last recipe.

"[Kim] did the recipes, and she'd have to do them over and over with a team of people," she explains. "I went to Petaluma, California, where we put the book together and where the recipes were made, and I was able to give suggestions, 'How about a little more of this, less of that?' It was quite an undertaking." She concludes, "I think it was easier writing my autobiography, to tell you the truth!"

But what (we hear you shouting in a ghostly chorus) is Elvira's favourite recipe in the book? Aside from the delightfully named "Guacamorbid," which Peterson describes with amusing obviousness as "a pumpkin throwing up guacamole," she's most excited to give longtime fans a taste of a dish they've been clawing at their coffin lids to try since 1988, straight out of Aunt Morgana's recipe book.

"My favourite would honestly be my 'Adraka Kozarole,' which came from *Mistress of the Dark*. Nobody had ever really known what was in it; it basically turns out to be kind of a green bean casserole. But–" she stops to make a crucial clarification, "the important part is that you top it with Cheez Whiz and potato chips that you sit on!"

Elvira's Cookbook from Hell may contain a smorgasbord of gorgeous classic and never-before-seen photos of the pneumatic nightmare of Falwell, Massachusetts, across 222 glossy pages, but ask the mistress herself, and the real star of the book is the rich and sensuous food photography.

With gooey red cakes dripping with buckets of berry blood, meatloaf men bisected just so, spirited libations that billow with the mist of a thousand graveyards, and enough midnight movie snacks to make your mummy moan, every page is truly to die for.

All of this adds up to a book that's a feast for the eyes as much as it is for the stomach, and with lavish, printed cookbooks having become something of an anachronism with the advent of allrecipes.com, *Elvira's Cookbook from Hell* makes the case for these dusty, eldritch tomes as their own form of art.

"I want this book to be a keepsake," says Elvira. "It's fun to look at and read, even if you don't want to cook anything from it! You don't have to do everything exactly the way it is here, but I think it's more of an inspiration book: it's the look, the presentation of the whole goth entertainment and cooking lifestyle that is out there."

Ultimately, *Elvira's Cookbook from Hell* is about the joy of sharing something, whether that's a good meal, a dirty joke, or even just a love for the macabre with your nearest and dearest.

"People are so disconnected, it's nice to gather with friends and share a good time with something fun and creative and interesting," Peterson avers. "With everything that's going on right now, we all need to get together and just have some good times!"

She concludes with a trademark Elvira wink: "And maybe a Corpse Reviver or two."

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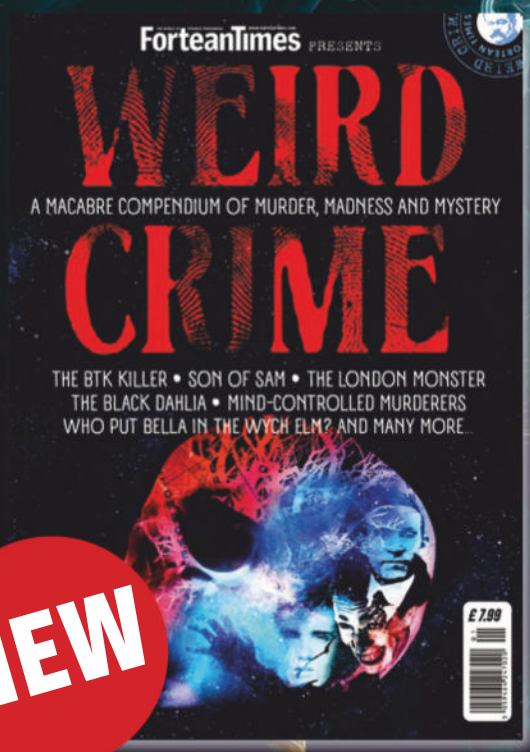
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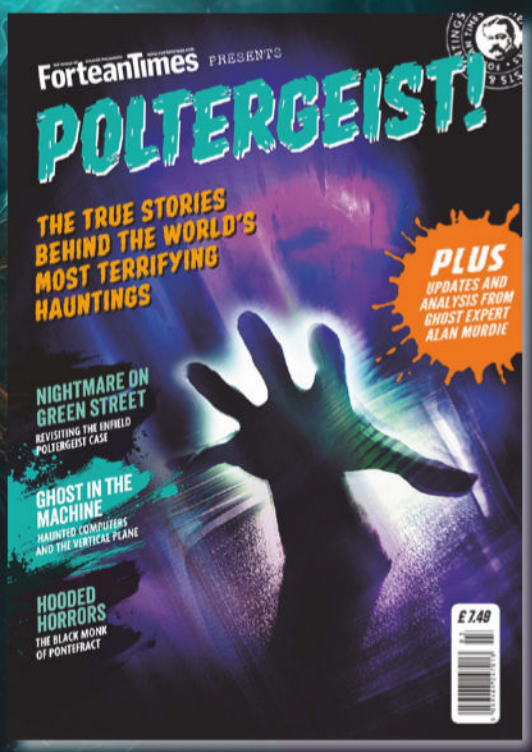
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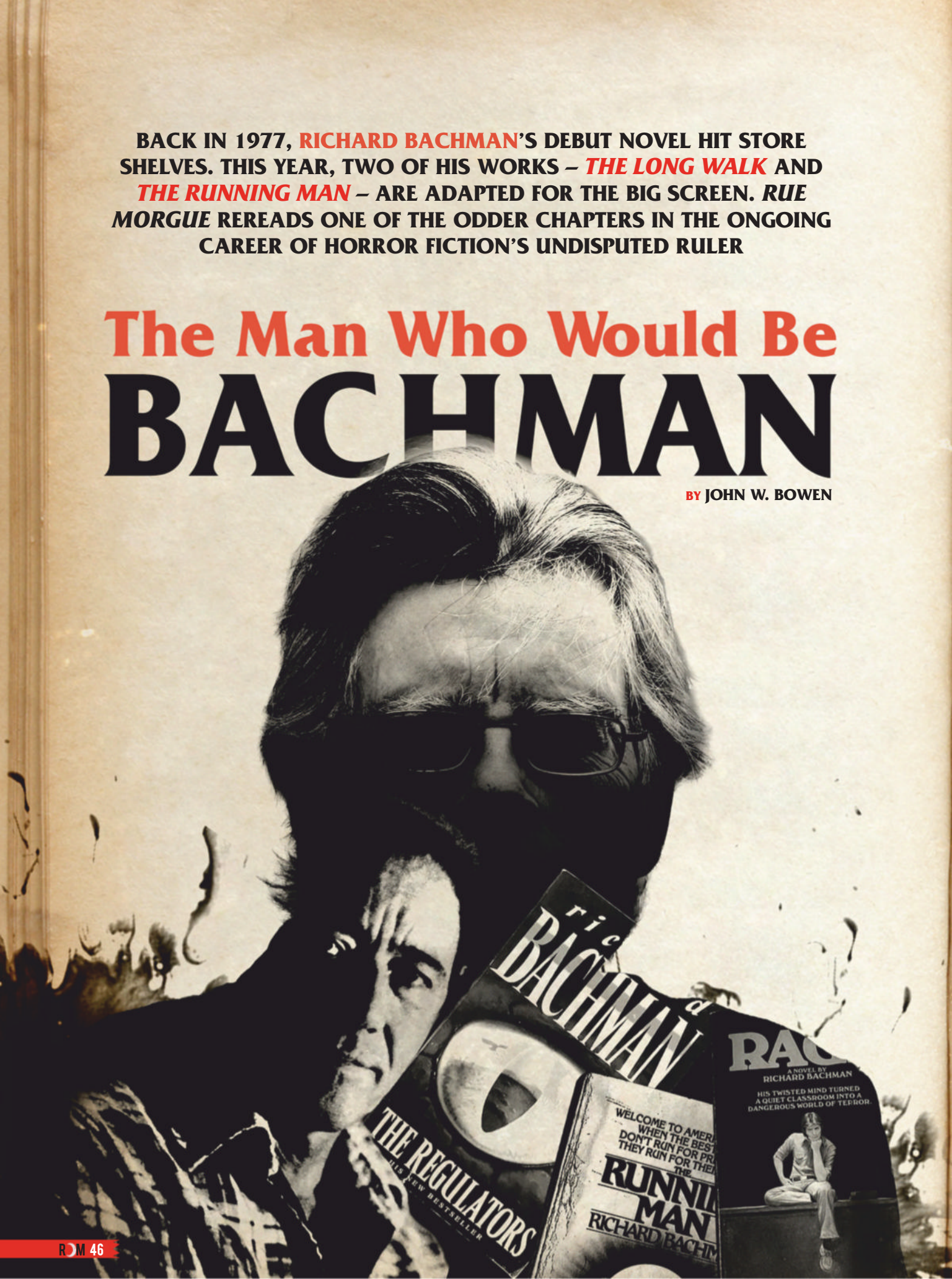
BACK IN 1977, RICHARD BACHMAN'S DEBUT NOVEL HIT STORE SHELVES. THIS YEAR, TWO OF HIS WORKS – *THE LONG WALK* AND *THE RUNNING MAN* – ARE ADAPTED FOR THE BIG SCREEN. *RUE MORGUE* REREADS ONE OF THE ODDER CHAPTERS IN THE ONGOING CAREER OF HORROR FICTION'S UNDISPUTED RULER

The Man Who Would Be BACHMAN

BY JOHN W. BOWEN



IT WAS HARDLY A FIRST. AFTER ALL, BIG-NAME AUTHORS HAD BEEN WRITING UNDER PSEUDONYMS FOR A HOST OF STYLISTIC, FINANCIAL, AND LEGAL reasons since the dawn of publishing. In some cases, their use of pen names had been such open secrets that they scarcely counted as secrets at all, whereas others didn't become widely known until well after the writers in question were deceased. But when Richard Bachman, credited at the time with a handful of moderately successful dark action thrillers and dystopian science fiction paperbacks, was exposed as Stephen King's literary alter ego in the late 1980s, the news didn't just shock King's gigantic fan base – it actually made headlines.

Stylistic considerations aside, pseudonyms have often been a simple matter of necessity for publishing house bean counters rather than the authors themselves. Until around the turn of the millennium, conventional wisdom had it that even the biggest names in fiction – the Anne Rices, the Danielle Steeles, and of course, the Stephen Kings – ran the risk of oversaturating the market if they released more than one book every eleven months or so. Further, since crediting a book to Joe Shlabotnik meant it would sell only a fraction of what the company might enjoy with Jackie Collins' name in bold on the cover, it also made sense to reserve the pseudonym, when possible, for material that marked any kind of departure from the famous name's trademark style or subject matter. That's assuming, of course, that the material in question really *was* all that different… which in the King/Bachman case, it sometimes was and often, just barely.

"WHEN RICHARD BACHMAN WAS EXPOSED AS STEPHEN KING'S LITERARY ALTER EGO IN THE LATE 1980S, THE NEWS DIDN'T JUST SHOCK KING'S GIGANTIC FAN BASE – IT ACTUALLY MADE HEADLINES."

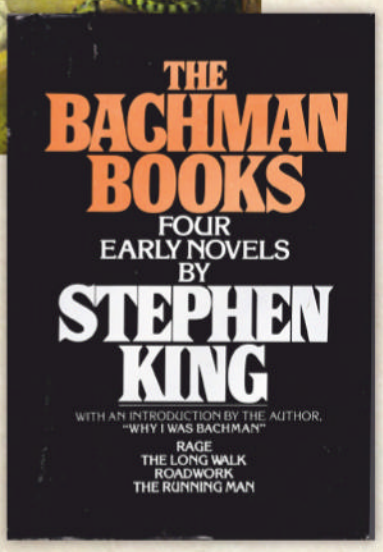
When King's popularity exploded in the late 1970s in the wake of *Carrie*, *Salem's Lot*, and *The Shining*, he agreed with his publishers and his agent Kirby McCauley to pseudonymously publish some short novels he had written in his early twenties. He initially toyed with using Gus Pillsbury, the name of his maternal grandfather, but eventually decided on Richard Bachman. "Richard" was a nod to Richard Stark, one of more than a dozen pen names used by King's friend, crime author Donald E. Westlake. (In an impressively meta chain of events, "Stark" would later be used by King for the fictitious character George Stark, a pseudonym-come-to-life, in his 1989 novel *The Dark Half*.) "Bachman," according to King, was chosen simply because he was listening to a Bachman-Turner Overdrive album while discussing the pseudonym issue on the phone with McCaulay.

Dark Doppelgänger: *Stephen King's nom-de-plume is about to add several film adaptations to his body of work, starting with* ***The Long Walk*** *on September 12 (top) and* ***The Running Man*** *remake in November.*

Rage, a.k.a *Getting It On*, was the first Bachman novel published, hitting shelves in September of 1977, eight months after *The Shining* was released. *Rage* concerns an unstable high schooler who shoots a teacher, takes his classmates hostage at gunpoint, and plays antagonistic games with the various authority figures who try to reason with him. It was followed by three more Bachman titles released in paperback over the next five years: *The Long Walk*, which takes place in a dystopian America and details the ordeal of contestants in a gruelling marathon walking contest; *Roadwork*, which concerns a grief-stricken man becoming increasingly unstable and violent after discovering that his home and workplace are slated to be demolished to make way for a new highway; and *The Running Man*, another dystopian future thriller about a reality TV show in which contestants evade a team of assassins. The four short novels were released between 1977 and 1982, concurrently with King's monstrously successful (and much longer) tomes *The Stand*, *The Dead Zone*, *Firestarter*, and *Cujo*, and the collections *Night Shift* and *Different Seasons*.

Since the supernaturally themed *Thinner*, released late in 1984, would be the first Bachman book to be published in hardcover, it would require the inclusion of some biographical information, and King, McCauley, and company couldn't resist having a little fun with the process. King invented Bachman's persona as a reclusive former coast guard officer-turned-merchant seaman-turned-New Hampshire dairy farmer who composed dark thrillers on his Olivetti electric typewriter while sipping scotch after the day's chores were done. The edition even featured an "author photo," which was actually a picture of McCauley's friend Richard Manuel, a Minneapolis-area construction worker.

At this point, readers' speculation about Bachman's stylistic similarities to King began ramping up, partially because *Thinner* was the first Bachman title that qualified as a full-on horror novel, but also because both parties' profiles had continued to grow; Bachman was enjoying a steady increase in popularity, while King's success had



long since reached the level of legitimate pop culture phenomenon. The tipping point came when Washington DC bookstore employee Steve Brown decided to do some snooping across town at the Library of Congress, to find out who the Bachman copyrights were registered to. Brown discovered that the majority were in the name of King's longtime agent and close friend Kirby McCauley – highly suspicious but far from hard proof, since McCauley still had a large roster of other clients. Only one of the copyrights – the earliest – wasn't in McCauley's name. After badgering and begging the Library of Congress clerk a little longer, Brown got his answer: it was registered to one Stephen King of Bangor, Maine.

Brown sent copies of the documents and a polite letter to McCauley and, several weeks later, was shocked to receive a phone call at work from King himself, who suggested that Brown write an article about his discovery, offering to be interviewed in the process. Brown eventually sold the story (including a lengthy interview with King) to *The Washington Post*, which has since been reprinted in a variety of media including Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller's critical essay collection *Kingdom of Fear*.

The inevitable media frenzy and subsequent remarketing of Bachman ensued in short order. In October of 1985, the four short novels originally released in paperback were repackaged in a single large volume, *The Bachman Books*, featuring King's lengthy introduction, "Why I Was Bachman." Exactly when and how Bachman exited King's world – *if* he even did – becomes ambiguous at this point. At the time, King was deep in the process of writing *Misery* (which would be released in 1987), a book that has endured as one of his most popular and critically acclaimed, and one which he has since revealed was originally intended to be a Bachman title. Two years later, King published *The Dark Half*, in which a writer's pen name takes on a life of its own with horrifying consequences, all of which the author openly acknowledged as having been inspired by the Bachman affair.

Despite King's smirking assertion that Bachman had "died of cancer of the pseudonym, a rare form of schizonomia" in 1985, two more Bachman novels would appear "posthumously" as manuscripts discovered by Bachman's equally fictitious widow in the cellar of their New Hampshire farmhouse. *The Regulators* was published in 1996, "twinning" with the King novel *Desperation* which was released simultaneously, featuring many of the same characters and hardcover editions that shared an expanded illustration on their covers. A new edition of *The Bachman Books* appeared alongside the release of *The Regulators*, featuring a new introduction while omitting the story *Rage*, whose subject matter no longer sat well with King in the wake of multiple American school shootings.

Now in his late seventies (but still churning out books at a rate we can only call compulsive), King's famous antagonism with Hollywood appears to have abated, what with the Andy Muschietti-helmed *It* films and Mike Flanagan's *Doctor Sleep* getting the big-budget treatment, *Revival* and *Under the Dome* hitting small screens, and more on the way. Before 2025 is in its grave, two more Bachman adaptations will be in theatres – *The Long Walk*, starring Judy Greer and Mark Hamill (see sidebar), and a second go-round for *The Running Man*, helmed by Edgar *Shaun of the Dead* Wright and starring Josh Brolin as the game show's demented producer.

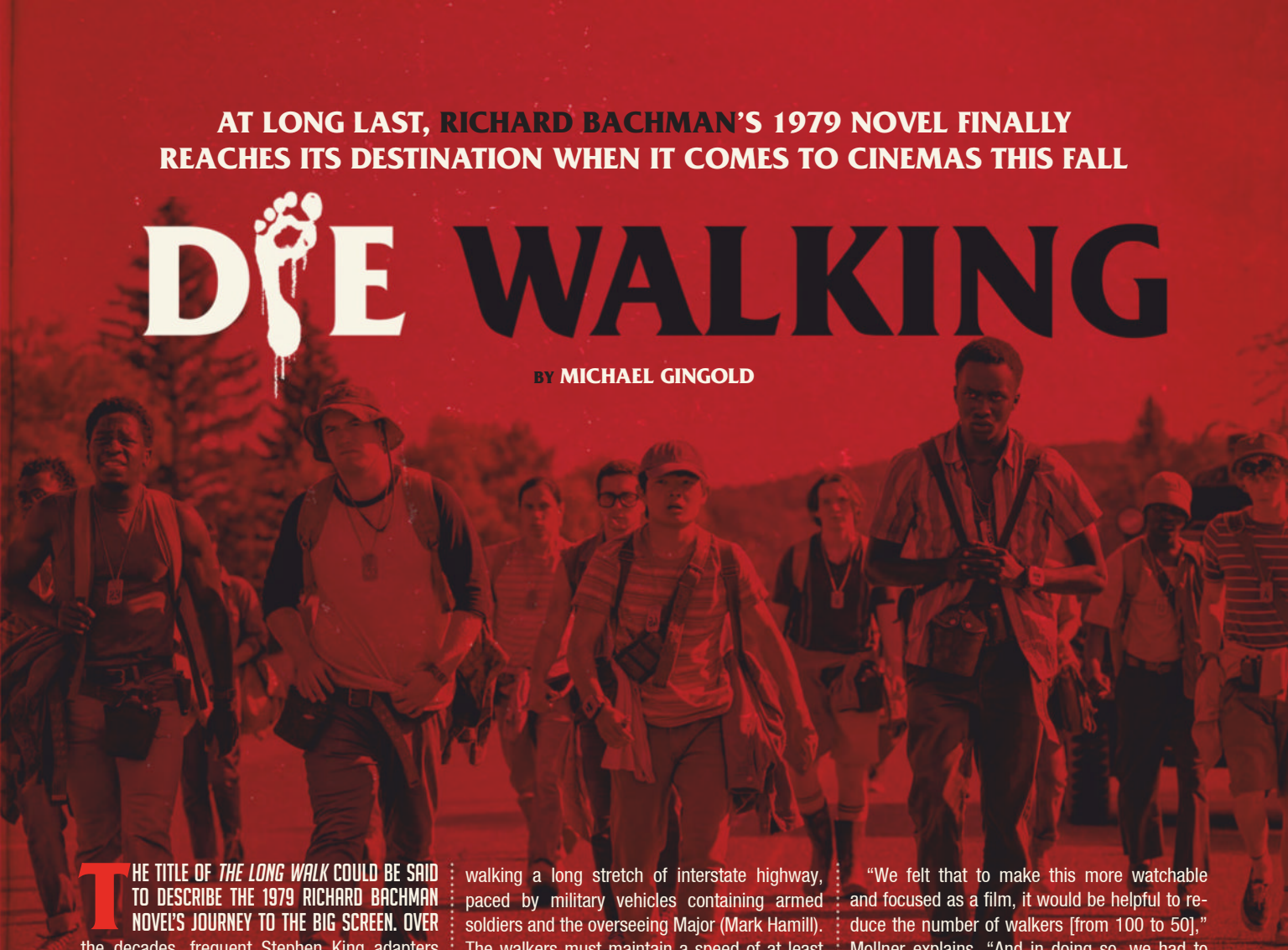
So, where do we at *Rue Morgue* stand on the whole Bachman episode? Despite King's assertions to the contrary, King and Bachman's stylistic differences are fairly minimal. Bachman's preferred subject matter may have been more earthbound, but he dabbled successfully more than once in the fantastic, as has his more famous counterpart (see *The Eyes of the Dragon*, *Dolores Claiborne*, *11/22/63*)… so what was the point of it all? Fan speculation abounds, ranging from the sardonic (to see if his work would sell without the fanfare of his fame) to the banal (to see if he could even pull it off).

King's detour to Bachmandom might seem rather unnecessary in the end – or more generously, a fleeting fancy to help the author get through some difficult times that needn't have carried on for so long. But as fans of the man, we constant readers are well aware that King's domination of the modern horror literary landscape isn't just a rags-to-riches one – from drug addiction to a near-fatal car accident in 1999, the guy has overcome hurdles with far higher stakes than mainstream success. To that end, I think we can agree that we're grateful to have had him in any iteration, and under any pen name. Would a King story by any other name cut as deep? My guess is it would.

AT LONG LAST, RICHARD BACHMAN'S 1979 NOVEL FINALLY REACHES ITS DESTINATION WHEN IT COMES TO CINEMAS THIS FALL

DIE WALKING

BY **MICHAEL GINGOLD**



THE TITLE OF *THE LONG WALK* COULD BE SAID TO DESCRIBE THE 1979 RICHARD BACHMAN NOVEL'S JOURNEY TO THE BIG SCREEN. OVER the decades, frequent Stephen King adapters George A. Romero and Frank Darabont were approached or attached and, in 2019, André Øvredal (*The Autopsy of Jane Doe*, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*) was set to direct a *Long Walk* feature from a script by James Vanderbilt (*Zodiac*). That protracted march to the finish line ends September 12, with *The Long Walk* finally being released, directed by Francis Lawrence (of the similarly themed *Hunger Games* films) and written by JT Mollner, who broke out last year with the acclaimed *Strange Darling*. A self-described "constant reader" of King's fiction, Mollner started fresh when tackling *The Long Walk*, declining the opportunity to read past screenplay drafts.

"I didn't want any of that to inform my approach," he tells *Rue Morgue*. "I read the book again, and read it again, and read it again; it may have been fourteen times. Each pass was for different reasons, figuring out what we had to do to make this story visually satisfying in an hour-and-a-half to two-hour form. We had to determine how to make it work cinematically while retaining the DNA of this brilliant Stephen King story."

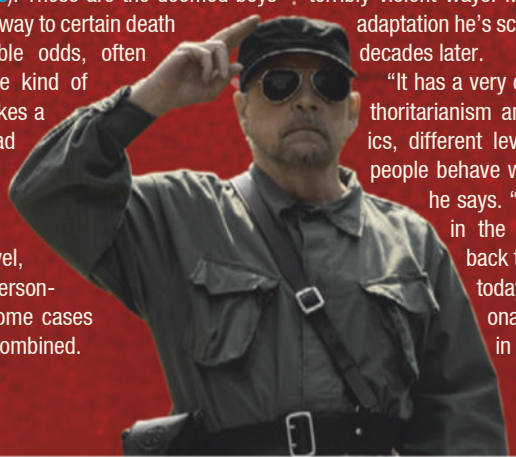
That story concerns protagonist Ray Garraty (Cooper Hoffman) as he takes part in the titular contest. Staged by the totalitarian government that runs the United States, it has 50 young men walking a long stretch of interstate highway, paced by military vehicles containing armed soldiers and the overseeing Major (Mark Hamill). The walkers must maintain a speed of at least three miles per hour (reduced from the book's four); should any walker fall below that pace, they get a warning, and after three warnings they're unceremoniously executed, until only one traumatized teen is left victorious.

Ray's fellow walkers include fast friend Peter McVries (*Alien: Romulus*' David Jonsson); Stebbins (Garrett Wareing), who seems to be the likely winner… at first; Art Baker (Tut Nyuot), who sees the riches promised to the Walk's winner as a way out of his impoverished background; antagonistic Gary Barkovitch (Charlie Plummer), determined to "dance on the graves" of his opponents; and mouthy Long Walk expert Hank Olson (Ben Wang, barely recognizable from *Karate Kid: Legends*). These are the doomed boys who trudge their way to certain death against impossible odds, often meeting with the kind of brutality that makes a bullet to the head seem like mercy. The names will be familiar to fans of the novel, though their personalities have in some cases been altered or combined.

"We felt that to make this more watchable and focused as a film, it would be helpful to reduce the number of walkers [from 100 to 50]," Mollner explains. "And in doing so, we had to amalgamate and even eliminate certain characters – which sucks, because I love the book so much! But when you're adapting anything that's more than 100, 150 pages, you have to eliminate so much in order to make it work. It's impossible not to on some level, so instead of including every character and every exchange, which we knew we couldn't do, we wanted to focus on retaining the core of the book."

King's story, which he began writing in the late '60s and ultimately published under his Bachman pen name, has often been cited as a metaphor for the Vietnam War with representatives of America's youth thrown by their government into a situation where they're doomed to die alone in terribly violent ways. Mollner confirms that the adaptation he's scripted is equally relatable decades later.

"It has a very clear message about authoritarianism and about power dynamics, different levels of society and how people behave when they're desperate," he says. "Those themes that were in the book for other reasons back then are all very resonant today – and will probably resonate for different reasons in every decade."



THE BACKROOMS HAS EVOLVED FROM A CREEPY ONLINE CONCEPT WITH A CULT-LIKE FANDOM INTO AN UPCOMING HOLLYWOOD HORROR FILM. BUT CAN EMPTY SPACE TRULY BE SCARY?

BY SEAN PLUMMER

ASK ANY REAL FAN WORTH THEIR SALT – ONE OF THE CREEPIEST MOMENTS IN *HALLOWEEN* (1978) COMES *AFTER* THE MAYHEM CAUSED BY MICHAEL MYERS. Just before the credits roll, as John Carpenter's iconic theme song plays, we see the spaces where The Shape had raged just moments before – a living room, the top of a shadowy staircase… now dark and empty. Today, scholars of online aesthetics might term this unique unease at vacant settings to be caused by 'liminal spaces' – abandoned places where the emptiness and calm engenders a sense of surreal dread. And while examples of its use abound in the horror genre, the most prominent modern example of creepy liminal space emerged from the internet with the online phenomenon known as The Backrooms.

For older horror fans, it may not be easy to comprehend what The Backrooms are, let alone appreciate what makes them scary. It all started with an image posted to the online forum 4chan of a Wisconsin HobbyTown store under renovation in 2019. It depicted a large, sickly yellow carpeted room illuminated by fluorescent lighting and separated by modular walls. And that's it, really. But something about that empty space tickled the imaginations of a very young and nascent online community – one that was about to be even further transformed by the pandemic. They took the stark weirdness of that original, desolate photo and created an extensive online world of creepypastas (a.k.a. short stories), digitally altered images, wikis, viral found-footage videos, YouTube commentators, and video games based on the concept. But The Backrooms trend didn't end there – the technique is on full display in the hit Apple TV series *Severance*, and a Backrooms movie is now in development with A24.

The most widely accepted version of The Backrooms' original lore depicts it as an uncanny labyrinth consisting of hundreds of different levels. Many are empty, but some are populated by "entities" of varying malevolence. Unsuspecting visitors can suddenly find themselves in The Backrooms

after "no-clipping" (a video game term that refers to transporting through matter and between levels) out of reality and into this vast, unknown space.

That's also the premise of "The Backrooms (Found Footage)," a nine-minute video uploaded by American YouTuber Kane Pixels (a.k.a. then-16-year-old VFX artist Kane Parsons) back in 2022. Currently sitting at over 67 million views, it depicts a teen filmmaker no-clipping into The Backrooms; the dimly lit hallways seem to go on forever, and shadowy figures are glimpsed in the distance. Soon, our unseen narrator is being chased by roaring monsters and free falls into a blue sky, presumably to his death. Parsons created several subsequent videos that fleshed out his version of The Backrooms and is currently working with A24 to develop the feature film.

Another prominent figure in The Backrooms universe is Jared (he "doesn't do" surnames), a 22-year-old YouTuber known online as Broogli. His channel, which explores every facet of Backrooms lore, has over 1.3 million subscribers and nearly 700 videos as of this writing. Most of his content explores levels, lore, and entities created by both Backrooms fans and Jared himself, including his own character Wiseman Broogli, a friendly five-eyed guide to The Backrooms who can travel easily between levels. Jared was a high school senior in Eastern Kentucky just before the pandemic when he watched a video about The Backrooms and was instantly intrigued, having grown up in the early 2000s on online horror phenomena like Slenderman and the *Five Nights at Freddy's* fandom. He thinks The Backrooms hold a special appeal for younger horror fans, especially those like himself whose lives and imaginations were moulded by the isolation imposed by COVID-19.

"These odd liminal spaces and pictures and stuff; it's kind of a time that doesn't exist anymore, but we grew up with, especially older Gen Z," he explains. "I think it's got a lot of nostalgia in there as well, and I think nostalgia is very big with The Backrooms. I think the reason for that is that it's kind of an accessible horror. It's not really graphic, it's not really gratuitous, and it's not terrifying. You're not gonna have nightmares about it per se, but it also is scary. It's kind of like horror from a distance, and I think that's the main draw to it."

Perhaps inevitably, given its online popularity, The Backrooms was doomed to be mined and monetized by Hollywood. The FX anthology series *American Horror Stories* explored the online phenomenon in an episode broadcast in October 2024. That episode, titled "Backrooms," stars *The Sopranos*' Michael Imperioli as Daniel, a Hollywood screenwriter haunted by the kidnapping of his son Roman. His attempts to distract himself with work are disrupted when he no-clips into a mysterious plane of existence where he sees his missing son. Daniel moves back and forth between realms, losing weeks in the process. Backrooms fan reactions to the episode were mixed, with several user reviews on IMDb taking it to task for its perceived mishandling of the subject matter. "If they weren't going to follow the source material," asked one reviewer, "why use the name?"

Unsafe Spaces: *YouTuber and Backrooms pioneer Kane Pixels (top) is set to direct a feature-length treatment of the strange, online phenomenon.*

There are higher hopes for *The Backrooms* movie. Announced in February 2023 as in development but only officially greenlit in June 2025, it is being directed by Parsons himself, despite the content creator having only turned twenty this past summer. The film is being released by A24 and co-produced by horror kingpin James Wan (*Saw*, *The Conjuring*) under his Atomic Monster shingle. Will Soodik (TV's *Ash vs. Evil Dead*) is credited with the screenplay. Other details about the project were sparse until this past summer when it was announced that Renate Reinsve (*Handling the Undead*), Chiwetel Ejiofor (*Children of Men*), and Mark Duplass (*Creep*) had been signed to star. Principal photography began in late June in Vancouver.

"As far as I know, Kane is very busy with it," adds Jared, who is on a couple of Discord servers with Parsons. "I do think it will succeed. I mean, [Parsons] pulls 20 million views a video, if you average it out. So, there is a niche for it. People will watch it when it comes out."

As they eagerly wait for Parsons' movie to get made, Backrooms fans continue adding to the various online wikis that compile their lore, writing stories about people no-clipping into entity-filled levels, coding video games, and making YouTube videos that act as proof-of-concepts for their VFX work. Jared thinks much of the appeal of The Backrooms is about fans finding each other and working together during the isolation of the pandemic (and beyond) to create something that would scare them, at least a little bit.

"A lot of people enjoy the collaborative fiction aspect of it, kind of everybody working together," he says. "They like horror fiction, and they like just creating a universe that they can explore and kind of visualize. That's the entire draw, at least to me."

IT HAS BEEN A MEMORABLE YEAR OF RUE MORGUE EVENTS AND HERE'S A SCRAPBOOK OF HIGHLIGHTS TO PROVE IT!

MEMENTO MORGUE '25

1. Andrea Subissati with **Faculty of Horror**'s Alexandra West on Halloween. *2.* Andrea and **RMTV**'s Laura Hokstad hit Toronto's Krampus Ball. *3.* Patricia Damen with Richard Brake at ScareFest. *4.* Laura Hokstad and Mariam Bastani on Halloween. *5.* The Rue Crew at Frightmare in the Falls. *6.* Andrea with Eli Roth. *7.* Yasmina Ketita at a Rewind Zone screening in Toronto. *8.* Andrea interviews George Mihalka at Fogfest. *9.* Jessica Buck with Scout Taylor-Compton and Danielle Harris. *10.* **RM** alumni Justin Erickson with Aaron von Lupton and Paige Reynolds at Horror Trivia Night. *11.* **RM**'s James Burrell with Tom Savini. *12.* Laura Hokstad meets Art the Clown. *13.* Aaron von Lupton with Slayer's Kerry King. *14.* Monica S. Kuebler and Brenton Bentz on Halloween. *15.* Andrea and **RMTV**'s Ashlea Wessel with the Adams Family at Fantasia. *16.* Andrea and Jessica with Shane Mills and the ghouls of Grind Mind at Fogfest. *17.* Yasmina and Andrea at the Portland Retro Gaming Expo. *18.* **RM**'s Kevin Hoover with Michael Berryman at FrankenCon. *19.* Aaron von Lupton with **Friday the 13th**'s Ron Millkie and Debra S. Hayes in Niagara Falls. *20.* Patricia, Yasmina, and Kevin at ScareFest Weekend. *21.* Andrea visits the SK Tour in Bangor, Maine. *22.* Andrea with **RM** president Rodrigo Gudiño in Puerto Villarta, Mexico. *23.* Jessica with the cast of **Thanksgiving** at Frightmare in the Falls. *24.* **RM**'s Jay Clarke with Jessica Buck. *25.* **Clown in a Cornfield**'s Adam Cesare with Kevin at FrankenCon. *26.* **Hellraiser**'s Ashley Laurence with Andrea at Salem Horror Fest. *27.* Andrea with **Final Destination Bloodlines** directors Zach Lipovsky and Adam Stein.

CINEMACABRE

FILM + DVD + REISSUES

HARDLY A (TOXIC) WASTE

THE TOXIC AVENGER

Starring Peter Dinklage, Taylour Page and Kevin Bacon
Directed by Macon Blair
Written by Macon Blair, Lloyd Kaufman and Joe Ritter
Legendary

All the slime, almost all the gore, significantly fewer boobies (but still several), and all the pitch-dark humour with the same generous dollop of optimism and human decency at its core – that's the short answer to what most longtime Troma fans are asking about the long-rumoured remake of the famously, fiercely, fuck-you independent movie studio's flagship franchise.

It's unrealistic to expect any remake of such a beloved and iconic cult sensation to please all of the original's rabid fans, and a few will doubtless come away disgruntled. But the good news (for most of us, anyway) is that writer/director Macon Blair has kept his version very faithful to the original without falling all over himself to check every box. Because, let's face it, when you're rebooting a cult classic, you can cater slavishly to fan expectations or you can make a good movie, but not both, and Blair has wisely chosen the latter option. *Toxie* 2025 replaces the 1984 original's browbeaten health club mop-boy, bully-magnet, and full-time incel Melvin Ferd with Winston Gooze (Peter Dinklage), a widowed, perpetually fucked-over middle-aged janitor who's just trying to get by and reconnect with his increasingly estranged stepson (Jacob Tremblay). Like his predecessor Melvin, our Winston meets with a fateful plunge into the toxic sauce churned out by his evil employers: gazillionaire industrialist Bob Garbinger (an excellent if slightly undercooked Kevin Bacon) and his misshapen brother Fritz (Elijah Wood). Reborn as a hideously deformed, musclebound (but still diminutive) superhero, Winston embarks on a make-the-bastards-pay mission and the usual anarchic, ultraviolent, and frequently absurd Tromatic good time ensues.

The old cliché "It won't make you forget the original" certainly applies, but that clearly wasn't Blair's intention anyway. And guess what? The original won't make you forget this fun, affectionate, and mostly authentic remake either. How's that for a win-win?

JOHN W. BOWEN

DYE ANOTHER DAY

FOREIGNER

Starring Rose Dehgan, Chloë MacLeod and Maryam Sadeghi
Written and directed by Ava Maria Safai
Raven Banner Entertainment

As a genre, horror thrives on the "stranger in a strange land" conceit. Bros looking for easy sex abroad get sliced up in backroom dungeons; tourists looking for jungle adventures run afoul of otherworldly killer plants… you know how it goes. In her small budget feature debut *Foreigner*, however, writer/director Ava Maria Safai goes about it a little differently, showing that assimilation can be as deadly as a blood-drenched torture chamber.

Persian teen Yasamin "Yasi" Karimi (Rose Deghan) relocates from Iran to Canada with her grandmother and widowed father. Any new student would be worried about fitting in, but for Yasi it's more like a mandate, one ingrained into her at an early age by her late mother: be like them, look like them, become one of them. She stays

up late reading fashion magazines and repeatedly watching old VHS tapes of an insipid sitcom, doing her best to mimic voices and inflections. She begins hanging out with a trio of cool girls, and group alpha Rachel (Chloë MacLeod) convinces Yasi to dye her black hair blonde to fit in all the better. She soon experiences mental and physical side effects that may be due to something even more sinister than a shitty drugstore bleach job.

Drawing from her own experiences as a mid-aughties Persian tween in Vancouver, Safai has crafted a smart, often funny look at the dangers of losing one's identity in the name of belonging. As Yasamin, newcomer Rose Dehgan deftly swings from big outbursts of the "You just don't get it, Dad!" variety to more subtle moments where she tries to untangle the dissonance of wanting to be friends with someone who believes "I don't think all brown people are terrorists!" is a compliment.

Safai's odd stylistic choices (particularly when it comes to Rachel and the gang's mannerisms) often pull us out of a scene, and when the outright "horror" arrives, it's all too brief to have a great impact. But she's clearly a filmmaker who has something to say, so hopefully we'll be hearing more from her.

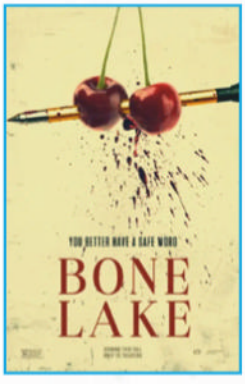
STACIE PONDER

Bone Lake

FOUR'S A CROWD

BONE LAKE

Starring Maddie Hasson, Marco Pigossi and Andra Nechita
Directed by Mercedes Bryce Morgan
Written by Joshua Friedlander
Bleecker Street Media



Is honesty really the best policy when it comes to relationships? Director Mercedes Bryce Morgan and screenwriter Joshua Friedlander explore that divisive question in *Bone Lake*, a clever and comedic thriller that successfully dips its manicured toes into horror.

Maddie Hasson (*Malignant*) and Marco Pigossi star as Sage and Diego, a pair of young urban professionals in need of some quality time alone. The cracks in their relationship are telegraphed early as it becomes apparent that Sage is not overly thrilled at being the only breadwinner in their household while her untalented boyfriend pursues a writing career. He's also not satisfying her in bed. Too bad, then, that their plans to enjoy a much-needed weekend in the country on a beautiful estate are foiled when they discover that the remote luxury property they have rented has been double-booked by another couple. The awkwardness dissipates when the other couple turns out to be fun-loving and up for anything. Indeed, Will (Alex Roe) and Cin (Andra Nechita) appear to be everything the troubled Sage and Diego are not: sexually compatible, relaxed, and deeply in love. Alas, a dark side emerges as they start to pit Sage and Diego against each other with small lies and, even worse, big truths. Soon, the mind games turn physical, and our protagonists find themselves in a fight for their lives and their future together.

Morgan, who impressed with her twisty 2022 film *Spoonful of Sugar*, uses her small budget wisely here, focusing on the relationships between the couples, which are brought fully to life by the talented cast and Friedlander's clever script. The director skillfully ratchets up the tension with each new revelation and betrayal, with a gore-soaked finale that suggests that trauma may forge the greatest bonds.

SEAN PLUMMER

FROM VHS TO PTSD

WHAT HAPPENED TO DOROTHY BELL?

Starring Michael Hargrove, Lisa Wilcox and Asya Meadows
Written and directed by Danny Villanueva Jr.
Dark Star Pictures

The found-footage subgenre is like a chainsaw: in the right hands, you can leave some geezer moaning about his aching banana with awe as metal teeth shred. In the wrong set of mitts, you have a rube slipping on a banana peel and turning himself into hamburger with his own dang weapon. Danny Villanueva Jr.'s *What Happened to Dorothy Bell?* attempts the found-footage equivalent of the *TCM* chainsaw dance and, while it fails to reinvent the wheel, it still lets a few fingers fly in the attempt.

Ozzie Gray (Asya Meadows) survived a violent murder attempt as a child. That's reason enough for therapy, but it's extra complicated for Ozzie because the one wielding the knife was her grandmother, the late Dorothy Bell (Arlene Arnone Bibbs). Now an adult, a mentally and physically scarred Ozzie attempts to uncover the truth of her twisted family tree by investigating her grandma and trying to communicate with the old woman's unquiet spirit.

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ON THE SLAB: THEY COME AT NIGHT

STRANGE CREATURES

6:26 mins/Vimeo via BullMoose Pictures Channel

In the dead of night, Nell (Quinn Jackson) pulls up to an isolated cabin after driving all night and ignoring calls from her worried girlfriend. Her goal: to find the lonely payphone she traced after a mysterious call… from her dead brother. This is the delicious premise for NYC-based filmmaker Nicholas Payne Santos, who had originally conceived it as a feature but decided not to sit around waiting for funding. Though his previous works lie more in a comedy horror vein, *Strange Creatures* proves that he can also slay on the other side of the horror spectrum. Pulling from his personal experience of loss, Santos creates significant dread almost immediately and carries it right through its less than seven-minute running time. Fingers crossed that we may see the full-length nightmare realized someday.

THE TENANT (LA INQUILINA)

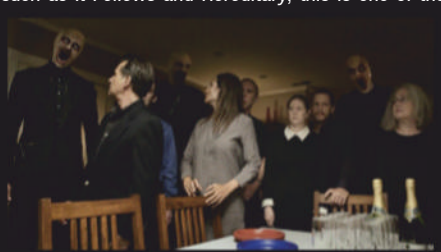
9:45 mins/YouTube via Daniel Feito's Channel

After waking up with a strange pain in her right leg, Mia (Belén Rueda of *The Orphanage*) encounters a woman (Elvira Arce) in the street who proclaims to know the cause and the cure of Mia's affliction (or is it something more?). In true Spanish horror tradition, 2021's *The Tenant* is steeped in dense atmosphere, beautiful cinematography, and great sound design, whether it be the roadwork sounds that awaken Mia that day or the persistent racket of a vagrant's spinning noisemaker. Directors Lucas Paulino and Ángel Torres broke onto the horror scene in 2019 with their short *Bedtime Story* (the rights to which were bought by Sam Raimi) and have not stopped working since. Paulino's newest creeper, *Be Right Back*, is currently tearing up the festival circuit.

SPECIAL DAY

7:09 mins/Vimeo via Ink Run Films' Channel.

This one is a classic! It is Emily's (Maya Bowman) 18th birthday and her entire extended family is in attendance to celebrate. As she blows out her candles, her father (Caesar James) explains that now that she is of age, she can learn about her special gift; one that only her rich and powerful brethren possess. *Special Day* is a terrific example of a taut one-location creeper that builds a horrifying world out of nothing but well-executed mythos. Recalling iconic lore from modern films such as *It Follows* and *Hereditary*, this is one of those rare occasions where you wish a short film was longer, so it should be no surprise that director Teal Greyhavens and writer Nikolai Von Keller have spent considerable energy trying to make that happen. In the meantime, their production company Ink Run Films has many projects on the go, including a prison possession feature called *Down With the Devil*.



JAY CLARKE

Being 2025 and all, it's hard to approach a new found-footage flick without some bias. At best, a movie incorporates the conceit seamlessly for effective narrative progression. At worst, it hamstrings a story by pushing unnatural reasons for filming everything and limiting the cinematic eye through fixed perspectives. In this case, Ozzie's journey is shown to us through a variety of video media from security footage to home movies, to tapings of Ozzie's therapy sessions with Dr. Robin Connelly (Lisa Wilcox, final girl of *Nightmare on Elm Street 4* and *5*). These techniques work for the most part, filling in plot gaps and providing insight to the girl's fragile mental state.

Where *Dorothy Bell* struggles is in the scares department, with frankly rote executions from the jump-scare playbook. Another issue is the cursed artifact, introduced too late via an obligatory "paranormal expert." The book has an intriguing occult history, but it's barely explored before it becomes a sentient MacGuffin of evil. Then we're practically sprinting to the climax, betraying the eerie pace established by the stronger first act. In the end, there's not enough cohesion for the movie to gel as a horrific whole. There's promise here, but it's shrouded in darkness; a spectre not quite corporeal enough to leave a lasting mark.

DR. BENNY GRAVES

HATCHETS & HASHTAGS

SEEDS

Starring Kaniehtiio Horn, Dallas Goldtooth and Graham Greene
Written and directed by Kaniehtiio Horn
Indican Pictures

In recent years, long-underserved Indigenous communities have enjoyed something of a moment in genre films such as *Prey*, *Slash/Back*, and *Blood Quantum*, to name but a few. Onscreen representation is vitally important but having a voice behind the scenes is paramount, as multi-hyphenate Kaniehtiio Horn demonstrates in her debut directorial effort *Seeds*. Horn uses legends and history to grapple with modern Mohawk identity, all while having a bloody good time taking a jab at hustle culture.

Hoping for a way out of service jobs and a way into a better life, small-time Toronto influencer Ziggy (Horn) signs a promising contract with agricultural powerhouse Nature's Oath Seeds Corp. When she returns to the "rez" to housesit for a vacationing auntie, spotty internet service proves to be the least of her worries as her friends and family welcome her home with a warning: Ziggy's corporate sponsors seek to privatize seed distribution through genetic modification, an ethos diametrically opposed to Mohawk values and culture. The choice between money and ethics may be irrelevant, however, as

"NOTHING GOES BUMP IN THE NIGHT QUITE LIKE ITALIAN HORROR, DOUBLY SO FOR THE GOTHIC."

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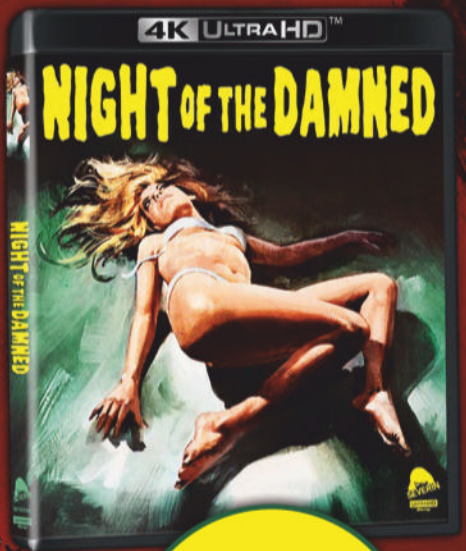

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Strange Harvest

the megacorp will take what they want through any means necessary.

Horn has proved a scene-stealer on the shows *Letterkenny* and *Reservation Dogs*, and as writer, director, producer, and star of *Seeds* she shines as the main attraction, but that light is just as bright when focused on her community. From First Nations legend Graham Greene (*Dances with Wolves*) periodically acting as a comedic "guide" through Ziggy's past to the interwoven use of language and rez politics, the film is a celebration of what it means to be Mohawk.

As a thriller, though, *Seeds* doesn't quite bloom. The meandering narrative shifts tones regularly, and at around 80 minutes there's not enough time to settle in. Despite a reliance on some timeworn tropes, the bloody rage against colonialism feels great, but it's over just as the gettin's good. Still, here's hoping the same won't be true for Horn's promising career as a storyteller.

STACIE PONDER

IN SEARCH OF MR. SHINY

STRANGE HARVEST

Starring Peter Zizzo, Terri Apple and Andy Lauer
Written and directed by Stuart Ortiz
Saban Films

Anyone who's ever been anywhere near a television will find *Strange Harvest* (released at festivals last year with the expanded title *Strange Harvest: Occult Murder in the Inland Empire*) comfortingly familiar. A new true-crime mockumentary by *Grave Encounters* director Stuart Ortiz, this mashup of *The Silence of the Lambs*, *True Detective*, and Lovecraftian science fiction – partly inspired, per the director, by the runaway success of Netflix's *Tiger King* during the pandemic – perfectly replicates the pulpy rhythms of this subgenre done right.

The film follows the investigation of a serial killer, which begins with a series of cold-case murders committed in the mid-1990s before jumping to the "present" (2011), when the killer starts up again. Our perp, known as Mr. Shiny, is a pure genre amalgam, prone to *Zodiac*-style correspondence, ritualistic practices, and a diverse array of elaborate kills that evoke *The Silence of the Lambs* (the only reference point that feels a little overused), *Criminal Minds*, and even some seasons of *American Horror Story*, among others. The tale is padded out via talking head interviews with Detectives Joe Kirby (Peter Zizzo) and Lexi Taylor (Terri Apple), the bereaved, and the cavalcade of "experts," along with naturalistic bodycam and crime scene footage (some creatively gory enough that perhaps only Geraldo would show it on air), cheesy graphics, TV newscasts on the case, and stock footage of the greater Los Angeles area.

As the years pass and the bodies pile up, potentially sci-fi and occult angles present themselves, much to the chagrin of the hard-boiled characters hard at work catching a killer. On this score, the lore Ortiz builds out in his script is spare but tantalizing – what does Mr. Shiny's strange trademark symbol mean and what do leeches have to do with it? Like its closest analogue, *Lake Mungo*, *Strange Harvest* is econom-

Cont'd on p.62

The Heart Stopping Horror Classic Rides Home On 4K UHD

1973 • Not Rated • Run Time: 87 Mins. • Genre: Horror • All Regions
Widescreen 1.85:1 • Audio: English (Dolby Atmos; 5.1 DTS-HD; 1.0 DTS-HD), French (1.0 DTS-HD)
Optional Subtitles: English SDH, Français, Español

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EXTRAS

- Audio Commentary #1 with Co-Writer/Director **Gary Sherman**, Producer **Paul Maslansky**, and Assistant Director **Lewis More O'Ferrall**
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THIS FALL, SELF-CONFESSED "GARAGE FILMMAKER" STEVEN KOSTANSKI BRINGS HIS SFX CHOPS AND D.I.Y. SPIRIT TO A NEW ADAPTATION OF ROGER CORMAN'S *DEATHSTALKER*

Monster Fantasist

BY MAGILL FOOTE

THEY SAY IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP, BUT ASK FILMMAKER STEVEN KOSTANSKI, THE DIRECTOR BEHIND SUCH MOVIES AS *PSYCHO Goreman* and *Frankie Freako*, and he'll say the opposite is true. Whether he's collaborating with the other members of the Astron-6 film collective (including Adam Brooks, Jeremy Gillespie, Matthew Kennedy, and Conor Sweeney) or surrounding himself with little rubber monsters of his own creation, there's always someone nearby, ready to lend a hand (or tentacle) to his latest effort, and he's happy to bring others into the fold.

"I like putting my friends in my movies," he tells *Rue Morgue* from his home office, crowded by monster costumes and puppets from his films. "It's fun to just kinda loop them into this wacky adventure that is my filmmaking career."

Having made a name for himself as a master of splatteriffic '80s throwback films (*Manborg*) and Cthulhian nightmares (*The Void*), Kostanski is now set to bring his trademark blend of comedy, viscera, and *tokusatsu* creature effects to a reimagining of the classic Roger Corman 1983 Conansploitation movie *Deathstalker* (due in theatres this October, digital in November, and a physical disc in February 2026).

"This was a real case of I was handed a list of Roger Corman titles that were available to be licensed and for films to be made based off of," he says. "The [*Deathstalker*] franchise is full of creativity, and it just felt like a fun playground to run around in, and really just an excuse for me to just clear out all of this pent-up fantasy stuff that I have in my head because

it's a tough genre to just go out and make a movie for. So, when this opportunity came up, I was like, well, this is great! I have so much fantasy nonsense – sorcery and magical bullshit – that I wanna throw on the screen."

In fact, *Deathstalker* reaches all the way back to the roots of Kostanski's desire to become a filmmaker, when he perused the aisles of his local video store as a kid.

"My earliest memories are from the video store," he reminisces. "Growing up on movies, I always knew I wanted to be involved in some capacity. I think a big turning point for me was [when] my parents got me the VHS of *Army of Darkness*, the Anchor Bay VHS that had 'making of' features at the end of the tape. I remember watching those and seeing the process of making that movie, seeing KNB EFX making all their funny rubber monsters like that Pit Witch, and just being blown away by the realization that these [were] real people making this stuff."

"Part of the magic of film to me is the chaos of it, the insanity of trying to get these things made."

– STEVEN KOSTANSKI

Beasts And Brutes: *The* ***Deathstalker*** *remake stars Daniel Bernhardt alongside a legion of Kostanski's trademark creatures.*

Of course, he is referring to the special effects company founded by industry legends Robert Kurtzman, Greg Nicotero, and Howard Berger. Seeing them in action also fuelled Kostanski's love for makeup effects, which he continues to pursue to this day, even though it doubles his workload when he's also acting as director.

"It's exhausting and totally impractical, but I love both things," he notes. "The best-case scenario for me is I get to make a monster, and then I walk that monster to set, and then I direct the monster. I get to go behind the camera and then see how it's presented through the lens and how it behaves, how it's lit. That stuff I really love and can't get enough of. So, I'm never gonna give up one for the other. On all my movies, I am jumping in, doing some creature effects stuff while also directing."

As of today, the director/FX wunderkind has created an impressive oeuvre of creature-laden cinema on a budget. His first feature as director, 2011's *Manborg*, followed a modified soldier (Kennedy) leading the resistance against Count Draculon (Brooks) with the help of tough guy Justice (Sweeney), his sister Mina (Meredith Sweeney), and martial arts master #1 Man (Ludwig Lee). A dystopian sci-fi action film was an incredibly ambitious debut, but Kostanski was able to pull it off on a meagre budget of just $2000.

"*Manborg* was [shot] partially in my parents' garage and partially in the basement of a store that sold blinds here in Winnipeg that was just sitting empty," he says. "So, we basically got a free studio space. A bunch of my short films were shot like that. With my projects, I'm never waiting for the perfect scenario where it's like, 'Oh, I'm gonna go film this at Pinewood Studios.' [It's more like,] 'Do we have a dilapidated building we can set up in? Great. Let's use that.' That is my garage filmmaking brain. Let's save money so we can try and put it on screen as best as possible."

For a project like *Deathstalker*, Kostanski knew that he was being given a dream opportunity. The 1983 original, a co-pro between Argentina and the United States, follows the eponymous warrior (Richard Hill) being commissioned by the witch Toralva (Lillian Ker) to retrieve a chalice, an amulet, and a sword from the evil sorcerer Munkar (Bernard Erhard). But his quest doesn't stop there: ogres, imps, curses, a princess to save, and a lady warrior in a thong are just a few of the treasures on display. Kostanski, cognizant that some of the original's "charms" wouldn't fly in 2025, keeps only certain elements from the source material and uses them as a launch point for his own ideas – most of which are more about innovation than exploitation, and employing the filmmaker's trademark style.

"I'm a very intuitive filmmaker," he says. "I'm not particularly methodical, especially when it comes to script writing. I'm not gonna spend two years slaving over a script to make every detail just right. Part of the magic of film to me is the chaos of it, the insanity of trying to get these things made. I think the insanity is what ultimately gives it its personality and its voice. And so, I'm just trying to introduce insanity by making odd decisions and putting odd pairings together to see what happens. I'm making a weird cocktail, and that's the fun and the energy of filmmaking to me."

OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE CATCHES A KIWI

IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

WOLVES

Black Mandala

My knowledge of New Zealand begins and ends with Peter Jackson's *Dead Alive*, which is why I was quite pleased to come across a Kiwi-based horror production house called Black Mandala which is behind the three films I am featuring this issue. The first offering is a bit of a slow-burn about a down-on-his-luck loner who decides to look into a rash of brutal animal killings in his snowy Canadian (?) neighbourhood. His investigation leads him to believe that the deaths could be the result of ritualistic sacrifices or an occult group gone mad, but what he discovers is so much worse (or less sexy, at least), that it leaves his fragile mind teetering on the brink of sanity! Though it plods and meanders at first, *Wolves* finishes off with a great twist. Still, the flick features *no actual wolves* which kind of takes the wind out of the sails from the title.

BODY COUNT: 1

MOVIE MEAL ACCOMPANIMENT: Lite beer and raw hamburger

NOT THE WURST

MOTHER SUPERIOR

Black Mandala

Young nurse Sigrun takes on a gig looking after an elderly baroness suffering from Parkinson's who is holed up in a derelict old estate in the Austrian countryside. At first the job seems pretty ordinary, but she soon discovers that the baroness was once the director of a women's sanitarium, which was run by the SS during the war! Alas, Sigrun has secrets of her own – namely, the real reason why she took the job. Successfully tackling the Nazi connection with the occult, *Mother Superior* takes an almost Lovecraftian approach to the mystical powers that would surely drive us insane if we came face to face with them. Beautifully shot on brooding, moody locations with a competent cast and accompanied by a rich gothic, operatic score, this kiwi fruit is ripe for the picking! Prost!

BODY COUNT: 1

MOVIE MEAL ACCOMPANIMENT: Schnapps and a schnitzel!

SOVIET SUICIDE

THE SYNDROME

Black Mandala

I haven't let myself enjoy anything Russian since its illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2014, but I must admit I was scared Moscow red by this flick by writer/director Vyacheslav Rudenko. Set in the claustrophobic streets of Saint Petersburg where a spate of strange suicides has occurred, a group of young people discover that there is a mysterious Man in White hunting them down who will make it appear that they have offed themselves. Is it a ghost? A curse? An infection? All they know for sure is that they're destined to die brutally and time is running out. With obvious homages to J-horror films such as *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, and *Suicide Club*, *The Syndrome* is both cleverly acted and beautifully filmed. If Russia would only put more effort into making films like this instead of invading peaceful countries, the world would be a much better place.

BODY COUNT: 10

MOVIE MEAL ACCOMPANIMENT: Bottle of vodka and a hit of acid

LAST CHANCE LANCE

ical, light on its feet, and somehow still feels original even as it confidently flashes its references like a detective's badge at an active crime scene.

PAYTON MCCARTY-SIMAS

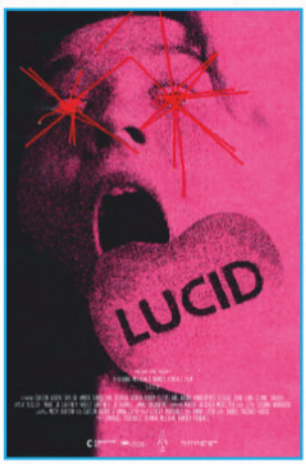
MUSE TO MONSTERS

LUCID

Starring Caitlin Acken Taylor, Georgia Acken and Mackenzie Lemire
Directed by Ramsey Fendall and Deanna Milligan
Written by Ramsey Fendall, Deanna Milligan and Claire E. Robertson
Sublunar Films

This modestly budgeted but ambitious Canadian production is one very trippy art-house horror flick, overflowing with all the pros and cons one might associate with that description and anchored by a fantastically strong performance from its lead.

Caitlin Acken Taylor dives headlong and headstrong into the role of Mia, a frustrated and predictably angsty 1990s art student whose poorly received projects have her on the brink of being turfed from her courses. And in fairness, while her instructor (John Luna) is kind of a dick, his complaints that Mia's work is clichéd and superficial aren't without merit. Desperate to unblock her better creative impulses, Mia visits Syd, a fortune teller (Mackenzie Lemire, a.k.a. Vivian Vanderpuss from *Canada's Drag Race*) who prescribes a "lucid dream elixir." Syd admonishes Mia to take the concoction only as directed and warns that any deviation from procedure could result in disaster. Well, you can pretty much imagine what happens when Mia grows impatient for results: before long her hitherto abstract inner monsters – a mix of repressed childhood trauma, young adult resentments, and some just-plain-old-deeply-fucked-up shit – come spilling out into her conscious world in disastrous ways. At this point, Mia's grandmother reluctantly offers some vague insights into the girl's unstable upbringing, but this only seems to aggravate matters. (Oh, flaky hippie parents, j'accuse! Has there ever been a childhood those people couldn't ruin?)



As is often the case with films immersed in the lead character's crumbling sanity, the wheels come off *Lucid*'s narrative in the final act. Any given audience member may find this tolerable or infuriating – both are perfectly legit responses – but Acken Taylor's deeply committed performance is likely to keep even viewers from Column B on board to the bitter (and deeply freakin' weird) end.

JOHN W. BOWEN

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REISSUED & REANIMATED

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

THERE IS A FATE
NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD
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NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD
NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD
INCLUDES UNCENSORED VERSION OF THE FILM – FIRST TIME EVER!
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NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD IS COMING BACK TO GET YOU, BARBARA

For us horror fans of a certain age, it's a sobering thought that Tom Savini's *Night of the Living Dead* is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year. The circumstances surrounding the making of his 1990 remake couldn't be more different than those of the Romero original; the latter was an expression of unfettered, boundary-pushing, independent cinematic freedom, while Savini saw his vision compromised by producer meddling and studio-mandated edits to achieve an R-rating. The result was a movie that garnered largely negative reviews and weak box-office returns.

Fans know that the motivations behind remaking *Night* were at least partially mercenary. Romero (who scripted the new take) and his Image Ten partners John Russo and Russell Streiner (who produced) were seeking to reclaim ownership of (and yes, maybe make a little money from) the classic they created, from which they saw few returns thanks to copyright and legal issues. Of course, they had set themselves a very high bar to clear, and revisiting genre favourites was no guarantee of box-office success: in the preceding decade, *The Thing*, *Cat People*, *The Blob*, and *Invaders from Mars* had all been financial disappointments, with *The Fly* being the exception that proved the rule.

So it was for *Night*, which only took in $5.8 million after opening two weekends before Halloween of 1990. But there were those of us who saw it as an honourable revisiting of the material, with a compelling reimagining of Barbara as an active heroine and a pair of strong performances by Patricia Tallman in that role and Tony Todd, in his first major genre turn, as Ben. It was clear from this film (as it had been from *Tales from the Darkside*'s "Inside the Closet" episode) that Savini had directing chops, as blunted as they might have been under these circumstances. Time has been kind to his *Night of the Living Dead* though, which has been reassessed and newly appreciated over the ensuing decades (and certainly, it could only look better in the face of the unofficial remakes that followed – not to mention the pair of negligible *Day of the Dead* remakes).

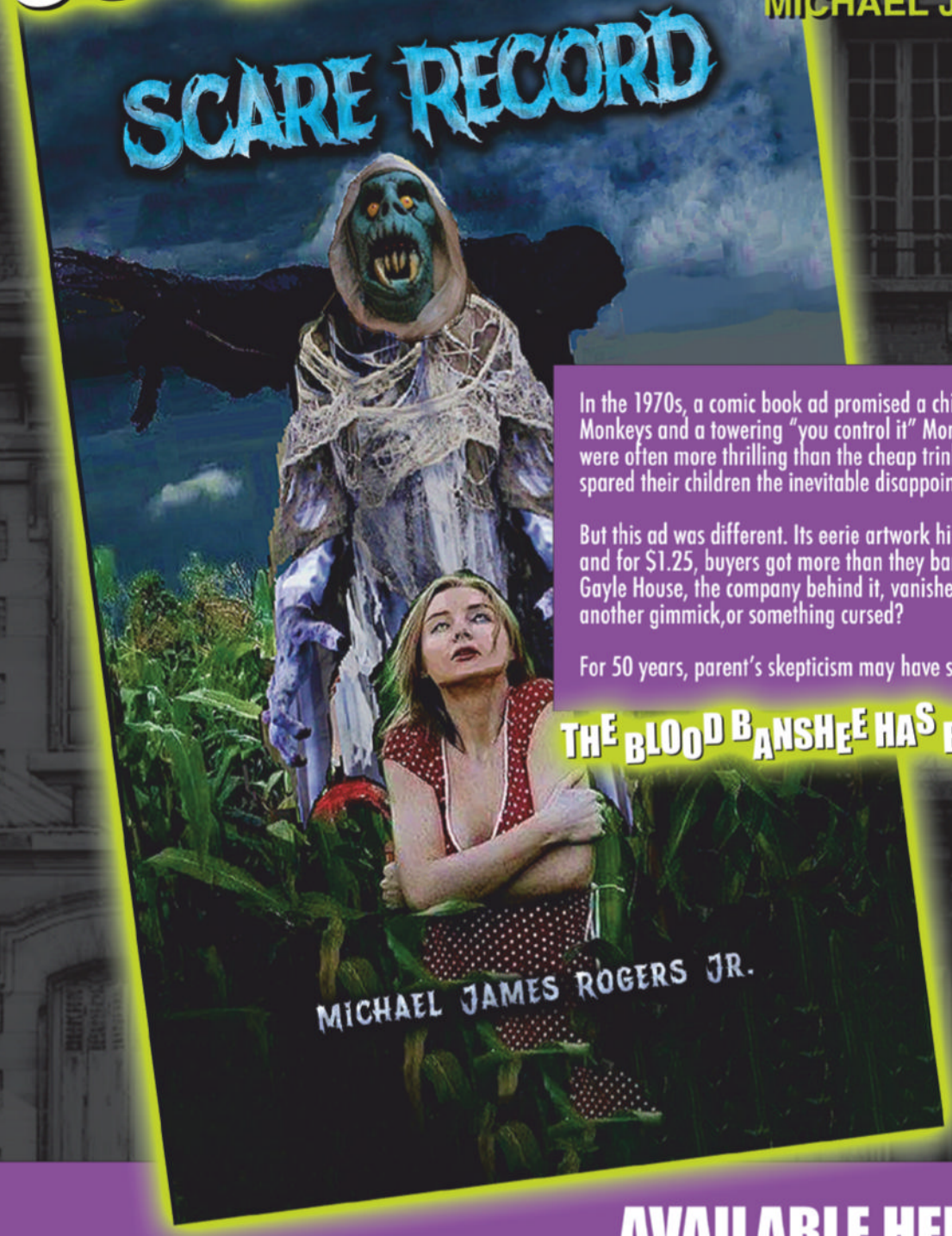
This year, *Night* 1990 is at last being given a proper disc showcase that takes a few steps toward realizing Savini's ambitions. The film has had an uneven home-format history, most notoriously a limited-edition Blu-ray released by Twilight Time in 2012 that fell under heavy fan criticism for its colour timing, which put a dark blue cast on many scenes. The new 4K UHD/Blu-ray edition from Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, due out in a Steelbook edition September 23, will showcase a version of the movie that's truer to Savini's original intentions, with a number of gory moments that got scissored for the R-rating reinstated into the film, along with the theatrical cut.

On top of that, *Night* will be supported by a full package of bonus features, including a new Savini commentary moderated by supplements producer Michael Felsher on the UHD. The Blu-ray will sport an archival Savini talk track and six brand new chats with *Night*'s cast and creative team, plus the three interview featurettes (with Savini, Tallman, and makeup effects creators John Vulich and Everett Burrell) created by Severin Films for Umbrella Entertainment's 2016 Blu-ray.

Perhaps the disc's most significant facet is another alteration that brings *Night* back in line with its director's initial vision: the movie will begin in black and white before eventually segueing to colour. This was Savini's homage to Romero's original, and also serves to bridge the era of that film (Romero's was among the very few features shot in monochrome by '68) with the age of full-colour splatter that Savini had helped popularize with his effects in *Dawn of the Dead* et al. And is it too much of a reach to say it recalls another movie that was also a financial disappointment upon first release – the one with Judy Garland and the Munchkins?

SCARE RECORD

The new novel by
MICHAEL JAMES ROGERS



In the 1970s, a comic book ad promised a chilling record: sold along Sea Monkeys and a towering "you control it" Monster Ghost. These novelty ads were often more thrilling than the cheap trinkets they sold, and wise parents spared their children the inevitable disappointment.

But this ad was different. Its eerie artwork hinted atsomething far more sinister, and for $1.25, buyers got more than they bargained for. The mysterious Gayle House, the company behind it, vanished without a trace. Was it just another gimmick,or something cursed?

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IT CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT

DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

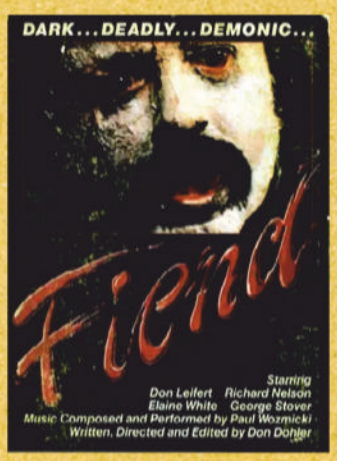
A Fiend in Need

by John W. Bowen

Ultimately, there are only two types of people in the world. There are those who, immediately after watching the late Don Dohler's craptastically fun 1982 space monster dime-bagger *Nightbeast*, embark on an obsessive quest to track down the rest of Dohler's poverty-row oeuvre. And then there are... uh... "others." And that's basically it for humanity. Residing as I do squarely in Column A, Dohler's preceding feature *Fiend* became a must-see for me as soon as *Nightbeast*'s closing credits rolled. Of course, this also fuelled an underlying question: did he peak (relatively speaking) with *Nightbeast*?

That answer became a self-evident "Alas, yes" for me before the first five *Fiend*-ish minutes had elapsed.

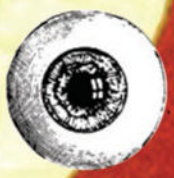
Grainier than cheap Dijon mustard and cursed with muddy sound that gets only marginally clearer when you can actually make out the dialogue, *Fiend* appears to have gone into production before Dohler (or his understandably bewildered cast) fully understood what it was about, which makes for some intermittently giggly moments but ultimately leaves it choking on *Nightbeast*'s space dust. An introductory title card informs us that "Certain legends have mentioned the Fiend, a hellish, destructive force capable of entering time-worn coffins and invading a decaying corpse, allowing the dead to walk the earth again. The fiendish corpse maintains its youth and existence by withdrawing the life-giving energy from human victims, who suffer violent and painful death." Okay? Whaddya mean, you need more context than that? (Pained facial expression, rolls eyes.) Oh, alright.



During the opening minutes of *Fiend*, said hellish destructive force, incarnated as a floating, shapeless orange blob of evil (insert Oval Office reference here), blobbily floats into a graveyard, reanimates a corpse with a '70s porn 'stache, kills a passerby, and eventually takes up residence on a suburban Baltimore cul-de-sac (hellish enough for ya?), offing the local citizenry at regular intervals in broad daylight to absorb their life force, which briefly makes him glow orange and keeps him looking thirtysomething. His cover? Well, somewhere along the line, this not-quite-vampire/not-quite-zombie adopts the moniker "Longfellow" and makes a suspiciously large amount of money as a violin teacher.

By *Fiend*'s halfway mark, Longfellow's been wasting folks for their orange blobby life force almost every day for seven months, which you'd think – even in Baltimore – might cause the local constabulary to undertake more than a cursory sniff around the hood, but they shrug off any neighbourly suspicions about Longfellow because "he's clean." Enter suburban regular guy Gary, who drinks Pabst Blue Ribbon, looks like Ron Swanson from *Parks and Recreation*, and just isn't having any of this. And dammit, if Gary can't convince the cops or his own wife that the snarky, boorish fiddle instructor down the street is actually a walking corpse who's been leaving stiffs all over the 'burbs, well, he's just gonna hafta get his own Scooby on and bust the case wide open himself. But can he do it… (switches to italics for dramatic effect 'cause the boss frowns on all-caps)… *before it's too late?*

Of course, any Don Dohler viewing experience can be greatly enhanced by a) drugs, b) more drugs, and c) double-billing with John Kinhart's excellent 2007 Dohler documentary *Blood, Boobs & Beast*. (Old Don counted J.J. Abrams and legendary comic artist Robert Crumb among his ardent fans – what doesn't that count for?) Sadly, on its own, *Fiend* just proves that the line between "Don Dohler's lesser-known efforts" and "Don Dohler's just-plain-lesser efforts" is a pretty fuckin' fine one, and by "pretty fuckin' fine" I mean basically nonexistent. But that's why I'm down here – well, that and the rent's never due – so get the hell out of my basement while I set about exhuming Ed Adlum's pre-*Invasion of the Blood Farmers* "lost" years.



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GHOUL NEXT DOOR

BEAUTY RITUAL THROUGH BODY HORROR

BY S. ELIZABETH

I'VE STARTED TO FEEL LIKE I'M LIVING IN A FUCKED-UP EPISODE OF *THE TWILIGHT ZONE* – SCROLLING THROUGH INSTAGRAM AND TIKTOK only to encounter the same visage replicated across thousands of different accounts. The faces that the algorithm feeds me are all starting to look alike, perhaps because I am a woman of a certain age, hag-dom imminent, cooter full of cobwebs (or at least that's what I imagine marketing teams think of me). The same impossibly smooth skin stretched over identical cheekbones, those pillowy lips forever parted in practiced surprise, those eyes unnaturally elongated into feline points. Even on red carpets, actresses I've followed for years have slowly surrendered what made them distinctive. Crooked smiles? Straightened. Charming freckles? Erased. Healthy bodies whittled to skeletal walking corpses. It's like watching a time-lapse of evolution in reverse – diverse specimens gradually converging into a single, perfected form.

"THE LANGUAGE OF BEAUTY HAS MORPHED INTO SOMETHING YOU'D HEAR IN A MAD SCIENTIST'S LABORATORY."

It gives me the same uneasy feeling as the scenes in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* where Donald Sutherland slowly realizes everyone around him has been replaced by something that looks almost-but-not-quite human. Or the cosmic dread of Carpenter's *The Thing*, where perfect mimicry becomes the ultimate horror. Except here, we're not victims of some alien conspiracy – we're all participants in a system that profits from our collective insecurities. I'm not exempt either; I'm right there scrolling, saving, bookmarking procedures I might consider as my 50th birthday looms like the decrepit shadow of Death himself, maybe with a Groupon for Botox.

I peer into my bathroom mirror each morning, arranging the implements of my beauty routine like a surgeon preparing for operation. Like Asami's meticulous torture kit in *Audition*, my implements are arranged with clinical precision – though supposedly for beautification rather than revenge. My chemical exfoliants – glycolic acid, mandelic acid, salicylic acid – don't just promise to "reveal your natural glow," they're dissolving the uppermost

layer of my epidermis, a controlled chemical burn happening in slow motion, like *Poltergeist*'s face-melting sequence but with better packaging.

My dermaroller is a Lament Configuration for the face. I willingly drag hundreds of tiny needles across my skin, creating thousands of micro-injuries because some study somewhere promised increased collagen production. Blood beads up in tiny pinpricks as I think, "This is fine," while the rational part of my brain mocks me mercilessly: "You have $500 in your IRA, you fucking ding-dong. Maybe worry less about your nasolabial folds, whatever those even are." I persist in this masochistic ritual with the fervour of a Cenobite acolyte, imagining Pinhead nodding in solemn approval: "Your suffering will be legendary, but your pores will be invisible."

Sheet masks soaked in substances labelled "snail mucin" or "bee venom"; these blank, expressionless faces sit in pools of dubious liquid, waiting to be applied. I press these uncanny cutouts onto my face, becoming temporarily something straight out of *Uzumaki* – my features spiralling into nothingness, obliterated beneath a second skin that drips mysterious fluids down my neck like one of Junji Ito's cursed victims slowly liquefying into something no longer human. I look at my grotesque, flapping visage in the mirror when I wear them, and I think of Leatherface (or that toddler in the meme with bologna on their face, asking for thoughts and prayers).

I've yet to try a "vampire facial," though my algorithm insists I must. Having your blood drawn, centrifuged, and then reinjected into your face feels like something from Cronenberg's notebook. Yet on social media, blood-spattered selfies rack up likes under hashtags such as #selfcare and #treatyourself. If Brandon Cronenberg directed a beauty tutorial, critics would call it disturbing social commentary. Put it on Instagram, and it becomes aspirational content. It would probably get a sponsorship deal.

Even the language of beauty has morphed into something you'd hear in a mad scientist's laboratory. We don't just "apply makeup" anymore – we "transform," "reshape," and "reconstruct." We speak of "snatched" features and "cut" creases. Contouring tutorials demonstrate how to "carve" new bone structure using shadows, building an entirely different face atop your existing one, a feat of scaffolding that rivals platysmaplasty in its ambition to defy gravity.

The extreme endpoint of this beauty-horror convergence appears in Coralie Fargeat's recent film *The Substance*, where an aging actress discovers a serum that births a younger, "better" version of herself. The film's body horror – literal self-dismemberment required to maintain this double – makes explicit what beauty marketing tries to disguise: that our pursuit of transformation demands sacrifice. The film exposes the brutal machinery humming beneath the glossy surface, the way we're all trying to carve out parts of ourselves to fit the template, physically and metaphorically.

But for tonight, I'm back at my vanity, applying retinoids and serums, knowing full well the contradictions involved. My bathroom cabinet contains promises not different from those in horror films – transformation through carefully measured self-destruction. The irony isn't lost on me, even as I reach for that new peptide serum. Perhaps I'll try fat grafting next, or maybe just let Ernest Menville mix me a potion that keeps my head attached despite my broken neck. A willing participant in my own body horror film, directed by capitalism and starring my increasingly unrecognizable visage.

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BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

Grief and loss can be very powerful narrative tools, acting as a springboard to darker and more sinister events. They are very much at the centre of the *Halloween Girl* series, from its beginnings as a 2015 short film, to the follow-up web series, and now three graphic novels. The catalyst for the saga is the tragic death of teenage Charlotte one Halloween night. Now an angsty ghost, Charlotte and phantom goth pal Poe do battle with a secret society named The Hollow that's determined to destroy the world.

Book Three: Gods & Monsters may be the darkest *Halloween Girl* yet, as the ghost gals investigate a series of strange murders surrounding a young boy named Kevin. Bullied at school and regularly beaten at home by his dad, his model train village and little figurines are his only solace. But what Kevin doesn't know is his play town and inhabitants have been invaded by a Hollow splinter group who are desperate to find a new saviour, and Kevin has just unwittingly been elected king.

"Here's this little American train set with a typical American town, and it's just this idea that they're right in the midst of everything where nobody would ever look," says writer Richard T. Wilson. "I just love the idea that there are other worlds than the world we know. These toys were just sitting in his room; what a great place to hide and be right close to him to enter his dreams at night."

Feeding off Kevin's dreams of loss – primarily that of his own mother – the dolls seek deadly revenge on those who harm the boy… though he's completely unaware of their lethal missions. It's a nice twist on the standard killer doll trope that gives the story a dark fairy tale vibe.

"It's the innocence of the children they're playing off and all the trauma he's been through," Wilson agrees. "He's inviting things in and doesn't even know it. He's not purposely sitting there putting upside-down crosses on his wall. It's just something that's kind of coming out of him, and this is his way of trying to work it out. And of course, he's not working it out, because he's a child – he doesn't know how to work it out."

Not coincidentally, the book itself was born out of the author's own trauma. Wilson originally conceived and wrote the bulk of *Halloween Girl*, including *Book Three*, circa 2020 during the COVID epidemic. It was a cathartic experience and helped him deal with his own anxieties and personal losses.

"Everything started during the pandemic, and I found myself having to pay the piper for putting things off in terms of my mental space," he says.

Halloween Girl: Book Three *sees Charlotte and Poe investigating a rash of murders emanating from a boy's miniature train village.*

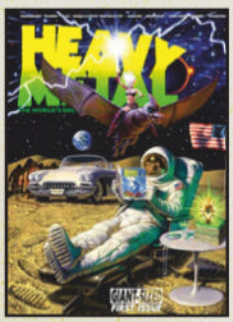
"I was pushed so far to the edge. I was having dreams about people I never dream about then finding out they just passed away; it was really creepy. My mind was working overtime because it was so stressed. And I sat down, and I wrote this story, and I swear it was pent up forever, and it just came out. I was so happy, I couldn't stop even though I was having a really difficult time. So that book came out of a lot of angst and I'm really proud of it."

FOLLOW PEDRO ON TWITTER @PCABEZUELO

QUICK CUTS

There's a strong supernatural element to *Night of the Slashers* which may not be immediately obvious from the book's title, evoking as it does psychotic chainsaw-wielding maniacs. To be fair, there are plenty of bloodthirsty crazies on display here, but their origins are among the many surprises to be found within an otherwise routine tale. For one night of the year, the residents of sleepy Hill Town are transformed into crazed monstrosities, eager to rip each other – or anyone else – apart. As it happens, this annual event coincides with a bus full of high school students breaking down and getting stranded there, making them unwitting participants in the festivities. The students are all character types we've seen before: the jock, the nice girl who manages to annoy everyone, the boy with the unrequited crush, and the tough girl with a tragic past. It manages to work, but the story's main strength – aside from the creature designs and bloodletting – comes from the unexpected twists and turns the narrative takes before its sombre conclusion.

When *Heavy Metal Magazine* debuted in 1977 it shocked comic fans with its combination of European aesthetics and American in-your-face sensibilities, breaking new ground in illustrated sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. The creators of the new *Heavy Metal* are hoping for that same level of impact, and while it's doubtful that today's readers will react with similar shock and awe, that's not going to stop those involved from giving it their best shot. Many of these tales are straightforward yarns, full of plenty of gruesome imagery, twisted humour, and a fair share of disturbing stuff that will leave you scratching your head in confusion or pondering the meaning of life (fans of the 1981 movie will also find many familiar faces). Shocking? Maybe not. Provocative and worth checking out? Definitely.



Oni Press' new EC Comics anthologies have been a horror highlight this past year, so it's great to see the company broadening its scope with *Blood Type*, a four-issue serialized miniseries. The star of the series, saucy vampire Ada, may be familiar to regular EC readers as she first appeared in *Epitaphs from the Abyss #3*, feasting on a boatload of sailors. This issue picks up shortly after as Ada once more helps herself to a ship full of seafood before heading to a remote island to relax and sample the local buffet of tourists and islanders. But when she encounters another group of flesh-eaters, the fangs come out. Are they ghouls, other vampires or something else entirely? Ada remains as fun and sardonic as in her first tale and the story moves quickly, taking some unpredictable turns that see our protagonist switch back and forth from predator to prey a number of times. Add to this some clever layouts, effective use of colour, and a side anecdote that hearkens back to the label's anthology roots, and it's a safe bet this won't be EC's last foray into stand-alone offshoots.

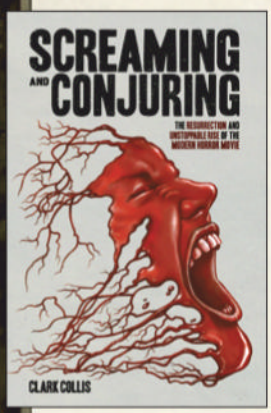
Since her debut in *London Horror Comic* #9, occult detective and monster chaser Jane Silver seems to have taken over the book, but it's not an altogether bad thing. Issue #12 sees Jane in two tales. The first is a magical slugfest between her and a Mr. Hyde-type creature she believes is peddling monster serum on the streets of London. It's a fun romp with a clever resolution that adds further insight into Jane's ethics, which are also on display in the second tale, "A Day in the Life of Jane Silver." This one is punctuated by several full-page spreads of her daily routine fighting an assortment of creatures, from werewolves to vampires to witches. While that may sound derivative, the brief backstory given to each altercation is creative enough to warrant a full story (the werewolf, for example, is a result of a hair transplant clinic accidentally using wolfsbane). That such originality can be flung at the reader so whimsically is another reason why this book continues to be a horrific delight.

Ella is a reporter for an occult magazine – an appropriate job for someone whose many talents include communicating with plants and animals. When she learns of the strange death of her college professor, her investigation sets off a chain of events that begins with an attack by vicious reptile men and ends with the secrets of creation (natch). *Indigo* is not afraid to think big and to its credit, it handles the cosmic aspects with style and a deft, thought-provoking hand – no mean feat for a work that dares tackle humanity's place in the universe. Where it falters somewhat is in its ability to bring those huge ideas back down to earth and make them resonate with the reader on a more personal level. Ideally, Ella should be that conduit, but the story moves so quickly and tosses out so many mind-boggling concepts in rapid succession that we barely have time to get to know her. A slightly slower pace (or additional pages) and a few more relatable quirks would have given the story more impact.

SCREAMING AND CONJURING
THE RESURRECTION AND UNSTOPPABLE RISE OF THE MODERN HORROR MOVIE

Clark Collis

1984 Publishing



Three decades ago, horror was suffering from slasher fatigue when Wes Craven's *Scream* changed everything. Clark Collis (author of 2021's *You've Got Red on You: How Shaun of the Dead Was Brought to Life*; *RM#203*) returns with a new deep dive into those post-*Scream* years with *Screaming and Conjuring: The Resurrection and Unstoppable Rise of the Modern Horror Movie*.

Focusing on films from the mid-1990s onwards, Collis meticulously analyzes the genre's brands and the impact of industry trends (including torture porn, found footage, zombies, the DVD craze, etc.) through today's lens to craft this horror geek wet dream of a book. (It's worth noting that he does allow himself to go further back for biographical segments on film artisans and to pay homage to the greats who have passed away.) Filled with contextual and skillfully researched information on pre-production, marketing, box office, etc., Collis' 504-page tome is greatly insightful, and his thorough observations and comparisons are always spot on.

He also doesn't shy away from real-life ugliness (including 9/11 and the #metoo movement) and even the most die-hard horror fans will learn new behind-the-scenes anecdotes about both their favourites and overlooked gems. Included are tons of vintage quotes from those involved, but also brand-new ones from big names such as Kevin Williamson, Greg Nicotero, David Kirschner, Don Coscarelli, John Carpenter, Frank Darabont, Rob Zombie, Mick Garris, Larry Fessenden, Edgar Wright, Eli Roth, and James Wan. But beware, spoilers abound. (Sometimes it's better to skip to the next paragraph or you might get a peek at a movie's twist!)

Revisiting modern horror movies is a joy, and it doesn't hurt when the hardcover book itself is a gorgeous work of art, with illustration by *Rue Morgue* alumni Gary Pullin. If you needed a refresh for both your memory and watch list, *Screaming and Conjuring* is a must-have, especially for all those folks who love nothing more than reading about scary movies.

KRISTOF G.

THRILLS UNTAPPED 2
MORE DISCOVERIES FOR SCIENCE FICTION, HORROR AND FANTASY MOVIE FANS, 1928–1936

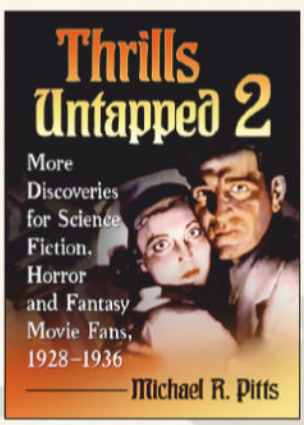
Michael R. Pitts

McFarland

Diving into the cinematic bloodline of our beloved genre is an endlessly worthy pursuit. Examining where we came from, and how we got here, enriches the understanding and appreciation of horror and other fantastic genres. *Thrills Untapped 2: More Discoveries for Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Movie Fans, 1928–1936* is the continuation of the work done by Michael R. Pitts from the previous 2019 volume, and it takes up the torch of the efforts to document and educate about a specific filmic generation.

Organized as more of a reference book than a historical essay, Pitts lays out an additional 150 or so films from the near post-sound era of film history. Each of the films chronicled contain a genre element, with some stretching the definition of what that might mean.

Though organized alphabetically by title, each entry is accessibly crafted with cultural context, production details, critical reception, and detailed plot synopsis, when available. Some films have images of print advertisements or stills in their sections, which adds to understanding the visual feel of those titles.



The sad reality is that a good number of films from this era have been lost forever. For every Universal monster we can treasure today, there are literally hundreds of films completely and permanently unavailable. *Thrills Untapped 2* does not dwell on this harsh fact but does make a point to catalogue what we do know about these movies, even if we will never get the chance to see them.

Thrills Untapped 2 is not the kind of book to sit and read cover-to-cover – most reference books are not designed that way. It is, however, an entertaining, well-researched, and approachable inventory of a great number of films to which we owe a deep debt. Without these films, horror cinema would not be what it is today, and they deserve the respect *Thrills Untapped 2* gives them.

DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

HORROR AND COMICS

Barbara Chamberlin, Kom Kunyosying, and Julia Round, eds.

University of Wales Press

One of the most exciting aspects of *Horror and Comics* from the University of Wales Press is that it doesn't dwell on the obvious. Readers aren't given yet another rundown of the battle between horror comics and American psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham, which led to the publication of Wertham's controversial book *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 and a sea change for the comics industry. (For those seeking a recent and entertaining take on that story, check out the graphic novel *Dr. Werthless* by Harold Schechter and *The Goon*'s Eric Powell). Instead, the book's inevitable chapter on EC Comics takes an interesting and previously unexplored angle, which focuses on how often *Tales From the Crypt* and its brethren prominently feature decay and themes of being overwhelmed if not outright consumed by a kind of apocalyptic entropy.

Horror in comics is a topic worthy of greater study, if only because of how often discussions are dominated by mainstream or mainstream-adjacent fare, whether that's horror offerings released by American publishers or by focusing exclusively on manga. As a result, we've been deprived of learning of Brazil's rich

history of horror comics, for example. As *Horror and Comics* details, many Brazilian artists borrow imagery and motifs from American horror (comic and otherwise), and artists like Shiko use the medium to address social issues pertaining to Brazil and its history. Additionally, how many of us in North America have any knowledge of the wonderfully imaginative (albeit less politically charged) collaboration of artist Renato Silva and writer Francisco Armond? *Horror and Comics* mercifully rectifies that.

Praise is also due to Elizabeth Allyn Woock, who gets things off to a perfect start with an essay formed in comic art. Woock's piece on evolving horrors and the artists who interpret and reinterpret them is so well conceived and pleasing to the eye that it's reminiscent of the comic essays of Lynda Barry and Scott McCloud. It makes one pine for a book that uses the medium of comics to tell the story of horror comics.

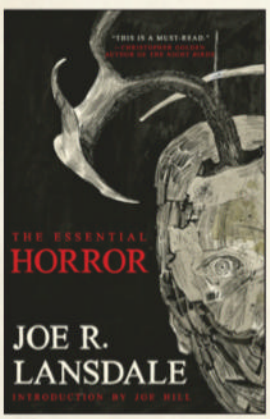
While *Horror and Comics* sometimes suffers from dry, academic writing, it's worth checking out for shining a light on some interesting, less explored creations in the genre.

ADAM CLARKE

THE ESSENTIAL HORROR

Joe R. Lansdale

Tachyon Publications



The pulpy, bloody, profane voice and energy that have made Joe R. Lansdale impossible to ignore since the golden age of splatterpunk about 35 years ago are on full display in this new retrospective collection.

Many of the stories entertain with straightforward narratives, fast pacing, gonzo violence, and gore. Many also include skillful, engaging descriptions of action, especially fights. Some are quite moving, and some are deeply disturbing, while others are laugh-out-loud funny.

That said, it bears mention that these stories are often told by male gazers who rarely fail to crudely comment on women's bodies – a hard-boiled, boys-will-be-boys machismo pervades throughout. Additionally, several of the tales portray unflinching depictions of racism, including characters' use of the N-word.

DANTE'S PICK

BRIGHT DEAD STAR

Caitlín R. Kiernan

Subterranean Press

Caitlín R. Kiernan's latest collection is so rich in dream material that the title of "A Travelogue for Oneironautics" could've served for the entire book. Many stories concern messages from deep sleep affecting the characters, with plot structures seemingly based upon dream logic – oh, and "A Buyer's Guide to Commonplace Bizarreness" literally takes place in Lovecraft's Dreamlands. The tales are thus part Lynchian and part Lovecraftian, but in their personal resonances entirely Kiernanian.

Don't look for the *Necronomicon* here; what you'll get, instead, are powerful invocations of the aeons long before mammals. After all, our author is an expert in paleontology, geology, and comparative zoology, so when they are dealing with prehistoric finds or the ocean, you can't be in better hands. "Discord in Anthracite" is evidence of that: is there an intelligent (and murderous) design behind a strangely shaped piece of ancient rock? And what's in "The Jar," other than a chilling homage to Bradbury? What exactly swallowed a girl inside a big, hollow tree in "Two Monsters Walk into a Bar"? The answers are not spelled out, but the latter achieves the balance of humour and horror so masterfully, it should be taught in schools.

These stories are like pieces retrieved from deep sleep, or deep time, or deep space. Their effects should be *experienced*. Take "Build Your Houses with Their Backs to the Sea," wherein a reporter is invited to a disturbing ocean-themed art exhibition in a shack on the shore. The story's essence is beyond words: retelling the plot doesn't even begin to describe how profoundly scary the whole damn nightmare really is.

Try it for yourself. This mammoth 450-page hardcover volume is heavy as a fossil, but it is not dead: like the best books in contemporary horror, it is a breathing, living, dreaming thing.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

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WHO'S LAUGHING NOW?

A NEW ANTHOLOGY OF STORIES, POEMS, AND ESSAYS BRINGS WITCHES TO THE 21ST CENTURY

Hammer for the Witches

by Dejan Ognjanović

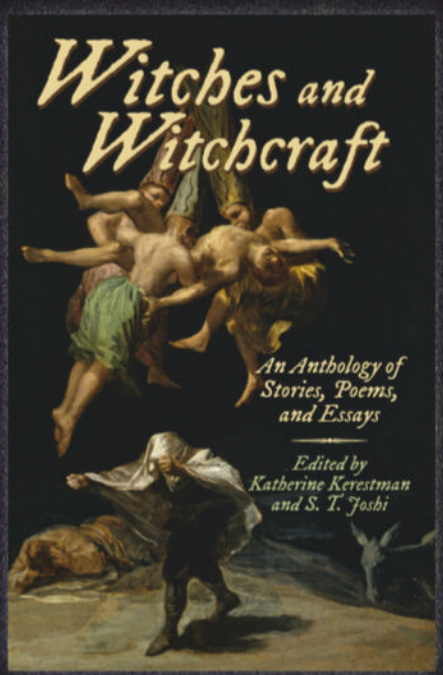
"WESTERN CIVILIZATION HAS LONG HAD A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH WITCHES... WITCHES CAN DO THINGS WE CAN'T, SUCH as dance sky-clad (naked) in the woods, have sex with the devil, and soar through the air on cats or goats. They can find hidden treasure and kill people they don't like."

Such is the introduction to *Witches and Witchcraft: An Anthology of Stories, Poems, and Essays*, edited by Katherine Kerestman and S.T. Joshi, coming from Hippocampus Press in October. This marks the pair's third co-editing collaboration, after *The Weird Cat* (2023) and *Shunned Houses* (2024), and its subject is, obviously, the enduring power of the motifs of witches and witchcraft as seen through a wide array of literary and non-fiction accounts.

The hefty book contains witch-related excerpts from several plays, as well as entire stories, both classical – e.g. Lady Wilde's "The Horned Women," Ambrose Bierce's "A Fowl Witch," and Frank Belknap Long's "The White People" – and modern, such as Ramsey Campbell's "Dolls," John Shirley's "The Children of Glimbly," and Anna Taborska's "[Ir]reversible."

Kerestman reveals that the book's main aims were "to deeply explore the aspects of magical wonder and human cruelty represented in these stories. In this book I hope to entertain, to engender wonder, to encourage empathy, and to broaden perspectives." The contents, she adds, were selected because of their literary and historical merit.

"Our basic principles were to select outstanding stories (and poems and essays) that were not so widely reprinted as to be familiar to many readers of weird fiction," Joshi elaborates. "This is why such a well-known story as Lovecraft's 'The Dreams in the Witch House' was pretty much ruled out from the start. Even Clark Ashton Smith's stories about witches were ruled out; but we felt that several of his poems on the subject would not be all that familiar. We also felt that a long historical spectrum was important – which is why the earliest item (an extract from Euripides' *Medea*) dates to 431 BC! And, right from the start, we wanted to include brief extracts from the witch-hunting manuals of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, to demonstrate how (chiefly under the influence of dogmatic Christianity) untold horrors were unleashed on (mostly female) victims who were accused of sorcery and witchcraft. These tracts are also, we believe, not well known to most readers of weird fiction."



Undoubtedly, the most enlightening – and frightening! – parts of this anthology may be the excerpts from manuals and "treatises" which were used to justify them, such as the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*, Nicholas Rémy's *Demonolatry*, Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*, and Matthew "the Witchfinder General" Hopkins' *The Discovery of Witches*. There are also pieces from more recent studies, from the perspective of anthropology (Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*) and the occult (Éliphas Lévi's *The History of Magic*, Montague Summers' *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*).

"In all times and places," Kerestman says, "humans have been both fascinated and terrified by the endless and unfathomable universe of which we are such an insignificant finite part, leading many to regard with awe and fear those persons who seem to possess influence over, or who possess a greater understanding of the cosmos than ourselves."

Those who may think that this book's subject is a dusty relic from a bygone era should think again, and watch the news, because the witch-hunts today are conducted by the media, puppeteered by the bullies in charge.

As Kerestman reminds us: "Of the estimated half-million accused and/or executed as witches, the vast majority were women. I consider witch-hunting the ultimate bullying."

(As a fellow Texan, I can attest to the latter's realism, which Joe Hill defends at some length in his introduction.)

If those caveats raise your hackles, Lansdale's *Essential Horror* will test your patience for pondering whether depiction equals endorsement, whether the book's "wildly inappropriate" strains – to quote the ARC (advance reading copy) – add to or detract from the storytelling, whether some topics are off-limits to comedy, etc.

In the taller of these tales, though, the characters' sexism, racism, and violence are so over the top that they become cartoonish objects of satire. And in the more naturalistic stories, Lansdale exposes those qualities in all their ugliness. "That is far more impactful than trying to avoid the obvious," he says in an introduction to Stoker Award-winner "Night They Missed the Horror Show."

Lansdale undoubtedly is one of the most prolific, venerated genre writers of the past half-century, and one of the most shocking. The only question is whether his kind of electricity tickles or fries you, and there's just one way for you to find out.

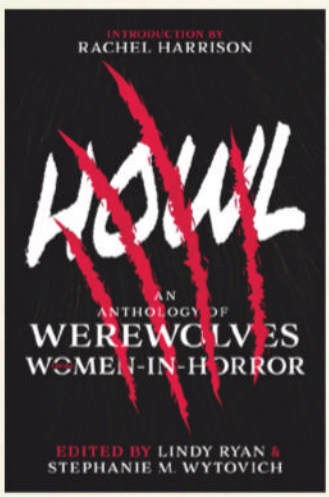
KARL RICHTER

HOWL

Lindy Ryan and Stephanie M. Wytovich, eds.

Black Spot Books

All too often anthologies bite, usually due to uneven story selection that leaves parts of the book feeling like so much filler, so it's downright refreshing when a new anthology captures us in its elongated lycanthropic teeth and won't let go. *Howl*, subtitled *An Anthology of Werewolves from Women-in-Horror*, is divided into four thematic parts named after the moon phases (New Moon, Waxing, Full Moon, Waning). The twenty-story anthology offers a broad yet carefully curated range of were fare (including a few poems), from some of the top women working in horror today.



In *Howl*, lycanthropy is far more than just a hairy vehicle for standard good-versus-evil storytelling and grisly set pieces. Few of the werewolves are the purely animalistic and malevolent sort, more of them use the transformation to enact justice or grant power (Christina Henry's "When We Run We Are Free" and Christa Carmen's "The Clearing") or aspire to a freedom not otherwise offered, as in Delilah S. Dawson's "It's Only Natural," where the transformation allows for reproductive choice that the state does not. While not every story taps so directly into contemporary issues, a certain poignance tints the entire anthology; these are stories that feel like they needed to be told, screamed into the dark night, not unlike the howls of wolves. There are powerful tales of female subjugation (Ai Jiang's "All the Men Who Cried Wolf"), lycanthropy as a medical condition ("Origin Story" by Shannon Robinson, and Kristi DeMeester's "Vestigial," in which the main character is driven to replace her excised vestigial tail), and coming-of-age ("Werewolf Girl Swallows the Moon" by A.C. Wise and "A Town with Too Many Girls" by Jessica McHugh).

Whether the werewolves within are protectors or avengers or something else entirely, they're always captivating, making *Howl* a perfect Halloween treat. Read it under the full moon.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

MONSTERS?

Much of being books editor comes down to making choices, as we receive far more titles than we could ever cover. Further, because I read up to five books per issue, there's not much time for personal reading. As such, my to-be-read pile is a perpetual teetering tower of potential death.

That's why I originally pitched this column: to be able to talk about older stuff, stuff I'm digesting late. Case in point: Valancourt Books' 2019 reissue of Elizabeth Engstrom's *When Darkness Loves Us* (1985). From the moment I finished the book's titular novella, I jettisoned my original plan for this issue's column, knowing I would write about this instead. The second novella cemented that feeling. Then after reading Grady Hendrix's introduction, I wondered how I'd contain my thoughts to 475 words.

The opening novella finds a pregnant newlywed woman trapped in a subterranean network of tunnels, guided to survival by the ghost of her former boyfriend. She lives underground in darkness with her son for years before setting her mind to finding a way out, hoping to show her boy the wonders of the world above. But life in the tunnels has ravaged her, and people have moved on, and there's nothing left up there but an exquisite new kind of pain and loss, eventually driving her to do an unforgivable thing.

Meanwhile, in *Beauty Is…*, Martha, the daughter of a woman with an unusual gift for healing is born nose-less before later suffering a mysterious trauma that leaves her intellectually disabled. When her parents pass and she's left to tend the family farm alone, she opens herself up to the world – both good and conniving – and begins healing in surprising ways, until a fresh act of violence unleashes all that repressed trauma in catastrophic, stomach-turning fashion.

In his introduction, Hendrix labels these "monster stories," describing Engstrom's creatures as "simultaneously predatory and pathetic" – a wildly different take than I came away with, though to be fair, his argument for Martha as a mirror has serious merit.

In my own reading, I found two ferocious tales in which young women were forced to endure incredible, cruel, isolating trauma, and surviving it changed them in fundamental and perhaps irreversible ways. Though the actions of both could be deemed monstrous at times, the word "monster" never crossed my mind. Perhaps the townsfolk in *Beauty Is…* viewed Martha as such due to her physical deformity and disability, but I saw only an intensely sympathetic character awakening to her own dreams, journey, determination, and even sexual desires, finally free of the impossible shackles of a damaged family that demanded she be mostly invisible. The tragedy being that she just couldn't escape her trauma and years of abuse. If there's a monster here, perhaps it's society, not the long put-upon women who snap.

Potent fuel for thought. Read it.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

Follow Monica on Substack at libraryofthedamned.substack.com

THE FRIGHT GALLERY

CURATED BY PAIGE REYNOLDS

226

THIS MONTH:

THE CAPTIVATING CANVASES OF CAROLINE BEAUDOIN

A RUE MORGUE COLLECTIBLE

Canadian oil painter Caroline Beaudoin's portfolio is a tribute to all things horror and a nightmare-come-true for genre fans. Her realistic portraits and scenes from iconic films – *The Exorcist*, *It*, *Scream*, *Hellraiser*, and more – are exquisitely rendered and perfectly detailed. Follow her work and her work will follow… you!

NAME

Caroline Beaudoin

HOMETOWN HAUNT

Granby, Quebec

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"I used to paint with acrylics, but I changed for oils about two years ago and never turned back. Sometimes I use grids to help me place the proportions, but my favourite thing is to paint directly on the canvas, with no drawing at all, and start to sketch with my brush."

DEEDS

"I'm super proud that [director] Damien Leone bought one of my paintings of *Terrifier*. And I can't find words to express how happy I am to be featured in *Rue Morgue*!"

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"I'm a movie maniac but [horror] was always my favourite genre. I grew up with Stephen King books and movie adaptations, so for me it was always natural to want to recreate them when they take up such a big place in my life. I always loved doing portraits, but there is something about horror that always brings strong memories, vivid colours, texture, and a nice variety of expressions that I really enjoy to paint."

LAST WORDS

"Something funny about me is that even if I watch horror movies all the time, I still struggle to play and mostly finish horror video games. Wish me luck to finish *Resident Evil 2* and face Mr. X again! Oh, and you would think I'd be more of a metal kind of girl but I'm a big fan of old rock, soul, pop, and bit of country. Now you know that I paint blood and guts listening to Queen!"

RESTING PLACE

Find Caroline on Facebook (Caroline Beaudoin Artiste) and on Instagram @CarolineBeaudoin-Artist

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A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY STACIE PONDER

THE INTERNET. HAVE YOU HEARD OF IT? I TRY TO AVOID IT AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE MOST DAYS BECAUSE IT'S SUCH A DRAG, BUT IT'S been on my mind something fierce lately as I recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of my horror blog, Final Girl. I know I'm looking back at 2005 through rose-coloured cyber goggles but compared to the online world of 2025, those were truly halcyon days. There were blogs and fan pages dedicated to the most random shit and decorated with gifs of fire. Discoveries were made through links in a blogroll and people would surf rather than scroll, visiting a dozen sites rather than staying caught in a social media hub's tractor beam and only chugging whatever the algorithm pours out. Sure, one had to be wary of the possibility of encountering a Lemon Party here or a Tub Girl there (if you don't know what those are, please do not investigate), but on the whole, it was mostly a pleasant place to spend time.

Alas, that doesn't describe the many cyberworlds of iHorror – *that* internet is a place where you adjust your hacker goggles, jack into the system, and die. According to iHorror, our computers were suddenly gateways to malevolent forces, be they human or supernatural, and each of these now-absurd scenarios stemmed, of course, from our fears, anxieties, and ignorance about what was a nascent technology.

There are a doll's handful of iHorror masterpieces, such as Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Pulse* (a.k.a. *Kairo*, 2001), which turns the internet into a haunted, haunting, lonely, and terrifying realm. While it's one of my favourite films, I am also endlessly entertained by the other end of the spectrum, where the depictions of the online world are delightfully ludicrous, to the point that I wonder if anyone involved had even seen a computer before the camera started rolling. Unless, perhaps, you are like the killer in Nico Mastorakis' 2001 iHorror disasterpiece *.com for Murder*, who strips nude and puts coloured flashlights on his fingers before logging on…? (No judgement!)

Given my cyberhorror passions, it's to my great shame that it has taken me 23 years to see what is perhaps the most (in)famous entry in the subgenre, *Feardotcom*. But see it I finally have, thanks to the launch of *Final Girl After Dark*, a podcast I recently (as of this writing) launched as a "get with the times" kind of companion to the blog. (That's right, call me Carrie 'cause I'm plugging it up!)

Feardotcom was worth the wait in more ways than I expected. It's simple, blunt, and for a 2002 film, a surprisingly accurate prediction of how our interactions with the internet would change us: that exposing ourselves to and wallowing in the images we see online can fundamentally affect who we are, and for the worse. Hours of scrolling down a newsfeed full of hate that dehumanizes "the other" may or may not cause your eyes to bleed as the website in *Feardotcom* does, but it can easily radicalize one into violence just the same.

Make no mistake, this movie is (wonderfully) dumb as hell. I mean, the website in *Feardotcom* is actually feardotcom.com, and it's run by a ghost. It's got video clips, sound effects, a chat box where you can communicate with the ghost… it is 2002-advanced! And that's the detail that has dialled into the modem in my mind: a ghost made the site? Did she have to buy the domain, settling for "feardotcom.com" when she found that "fear.com" was already taken, as the filmmakers did? The film gives no indication that pre-death, this girl was a burgeoning webmaster. Does the afterlife give free classes in HTML and CSS, or do those skills come naturally to unquiet spirits?

Either way, sign me up. I had to build a website for my new podcast (dunno if you've heard of it…) and even with drag-and-drop technology and a world of instructional videos at my fingertips, it was such a struggle. Little did I know it'd be a breeze from beyond the grave. Just don't forget to like and subscribe or risk a serious haunting!

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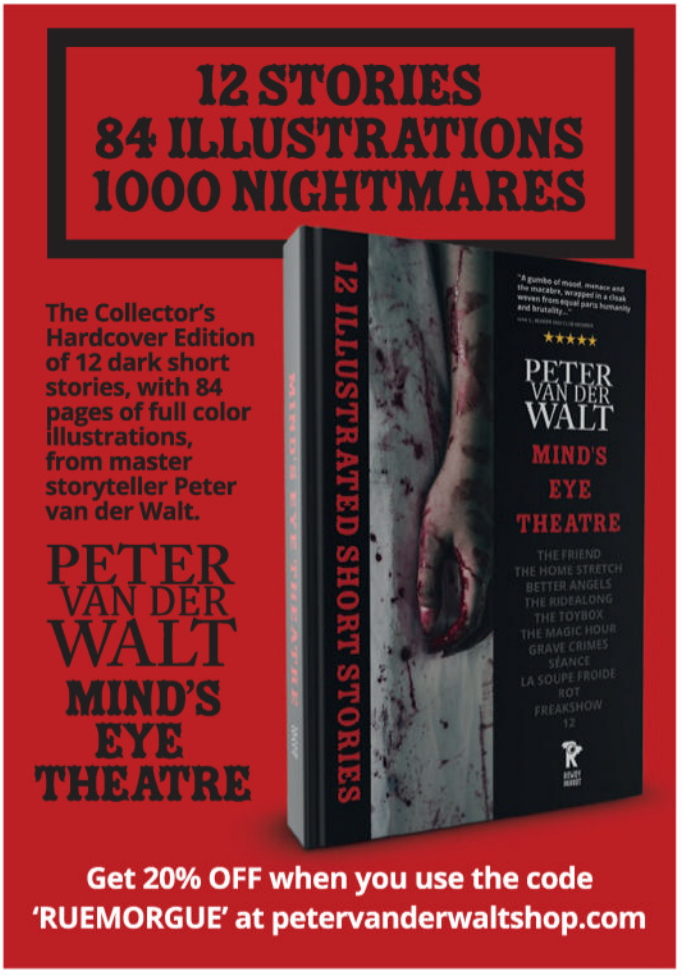
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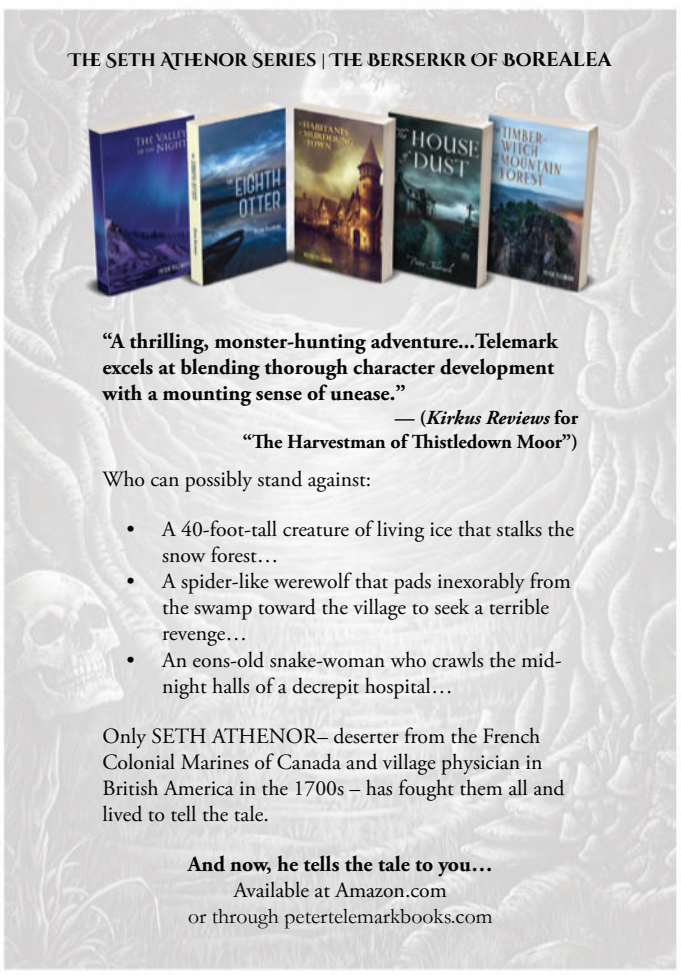
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AUDIO DROME

DEADLY | DANGEROUS | DECENT | DULL | DRIVEL | DOA DEAD ON ARRIVAL

REVIEWS BY ALEX DELLER, DR. BENNY GRAVES, AARON VON LUPTON, AND JEFF SZPIRGLAS

GEORGE STREICHER — ELECTRONIC

Music For Halloween Night

ENJOY THE RIDE RECORDS

Is your Halloween playlist feeling a little too atonal or Carpenteresque? Need something both melodic and mischievous? We got you covered. George Streicher's *Music for Halloween Night* is essentially an album-length valentine to October 31, a kid-friendly, fully orchestral romp via the kinds of beats that Danny Elfman made memorable in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. You can feel that essence from the opening monologue and follow-up track, "Eye of Newt," which mashes up the best of both Elfman and John Williams à la *Harry Potter* – which makes sense, given that Streicher also scored the *Harry Potter* video game *Magic Awakened*. Though it wears these influences on its wizard sleeves, that's no criticism. Streicher aims to capture the same whimsy, and he's able to string together something playful and coherent. Wrapped up in eye-catching art from Blake Armstrong, *Music for Halloween Night* is worthy of blasting through your window as the little ones come a-tricking and a-treating. ☠☠☠☠ **JS**

DANTE TOMASELLI — ELECTRONIC

Holy Terror

(INDEPENDENT)

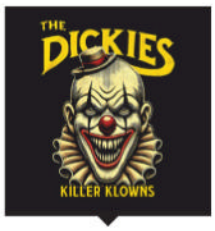
From opener "Route 666" on to "Near Death Experience," filmmaker and sometimes musician Dante Tomaselli's latest project *Holy Terror* isn't quite what you would expect from the album art, which looks like a Euro-gore film poster painted by a demented elementary school student. Then again, it's already hard to predict what you're going to get from the man behind such surreal, nonlinear films as 2003's *Horror* and 2013's *Torture Chamber*. With *Holy Terror*, Tomaselli is back to tackling Catholicism and Christianity in nightmare form, only with rapid-fire beats that are better suited to a club than a church, though saturated in underworldly effects and voices from beyond. Tomaselli considers himself a filmmaker who wishes he were a parapsychologist, so the veil here between aural fantasy and musical experience is gossamer thin. Meanwhile, several of the tracks on *Holy Terror* have been licensed by *Fortnite* (!), and it's dedicated to his recently deceased cousin Alfred Sole, director of *Alice, Sweet Alice*. ☠☠☠☠ **AVL**

LONESOME WYATT AND THE HOLY SPOOKS — GOTH

Sad Witch Cult

TRIBULATION RECORDING CO.

It's been a minute since we've heard the ghostly tones of Lonesome Wyatt in the Audio Drome, and now he's had his voice stolen by the sad witch cult, with vocal duties given to a new (female) vessel. All songs are still written by Wyatt, meaning the vibe here is still doom and gloom, moody and melancholic songs about longing and loss, and love in the afterlife. But the sad witch in question – real identity unknown – breathes a whole new identity into the music: at times eerie, shrill, and wispy, but also with the ability to become earthy and tinged with R&B. While the temptation to focus on a new vocalist is understandable, there is so much going on with Wyatt's instrumentation, from bluesy showtune-inspired numbers, gothic keys, and even electronic experimentation; the new *Sad Witch Cult* album functions best as a musical Halloween treat bag for longtime Lonesome Wyatt aficionados. Reach in and pick your poison. ☠☠☠☠½ **AVL**



THE DICKIES — SURF

Killer Klowns

CLEOPATRA

How did '80s low-budget effort *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* become one of the most licensed horror properties today? Feeding the fandom frenzy is this updated version of The Dickies' pop-punk theme song for the film, rendered by Cleopatra on translucent red vinyl. How does it compare to the original? Well, that was released nearly 40 years ago so this version is a tad slower, a tad less energetic, and vocalist Leonard Phillips is definitely sounding his age (although newish drummer Adam Go-Go Gomez has a tight wrist). All things considered, it still slaps, just not quite as hard as the original. Side B offers new versions of the underrated classic "Give It Back" along with the band's take on the public domain yuletide hit "Silent Night," which you've probably been adding to your punk rock Christmas playlists since high school. Hey, just keep the merch coming, okay? ☠☠☠½ **AVL**

NICOLAS CAGE FIGHTER — HARDCORE

I Watched You Burn

BLEEDING ART COLLECTIVE / BLOOD BLAST DISTRIBUTION

Get past the groan-inducing name and you'll find that this brutal Aussie band represents a pretty serious proposition. Nicolas Cage Fighter's second album, *I Watched You Burn*, is meaner than a half-starved junkyard dog: a knotty mass of sinew, muscle, and froth-jawed snarl that's just waiting for the perfect chance to tear out your throat. For this go-around, NCF takes the idea of a serial killer

MASSACRE AT FEMUR CREEK — SOUNDTRACK

Mike Trebilcock

FEMUR CREEK RECORDS

Yes, we here at *Rue Morgue* tend to champion homegrown Canadian horror productions, and that even includes micro-budget movies like Kyle Hytonen's buddy comedy/backwoods slasher *Massacre at Femur Creek*. Mike Trebilcock of '90s Canadian alt-rock act The Killjoys crafts a surprisingly professional-sounding score, an electronic "symphonic" effort that is omnipresent and constant in suspense, action, and dread, and just when you think it's never going to let up, here comes the wafty, uplifting "I'm Sure It Was a Night, Eh?" evoking the film's heartstring conclusion when its middle-aged cast sets out on a new kind of adventure. Flip over the LP and you've got dialogue excerpts and songs used in the movie, including "Cold Creeps" from Trebilcock's horror punk band Sematary Spawn. Initially pressed as a trial run to gauge interest, *Massacre at Femur Creek*'s soundtrack has been selling out at screenings so future pressings are likely. ☠☠☠☠½ **AVL**

PODCASTS FROM BEYOND

Bring Me the Axe!

THEME: '70s and '80s Horror
FORMAT: Discussion
FREQUENCY: Biweekly

Now that we're more than a decade into the podcasting craze, coming up with unique show ideas while trying to stay within a genre framework is becoming a bona fide challenge for new content creators. However, sometimes it's best to keep things simple, and forego gimmicks in favour of sticking with what you know and love. That's exactly what brothers Bryan and David White did with *Bring Me the Axe!*, a tribute to the time when video rental stores ruled the night. The show focuses on the horror films that the brothers loved while they were growing up in the 1970s and '80s (victims of the aforementioned podcast saturation problem, earlier episodes were recorded as *The Brothers Grim* before changing to a title that wasn't also being used by others).

Fans of all things cult and camp, the White brothers cover typical hits of yesteryear such as *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, and *Fright Night*, but also hidden gems of the time, including *Blood Rage*; *Butcher, Baker, Nightmare Maker*; *Pieces*; and *The Hitcher*. Priding themselves on research-heavy content, they spend a good deal of time discussing a film's production history, the actors and directors involved, and a wealth of behind-the-scenes details that aren't common knowledge, even to the keenest horror fans. Transporting listeners back to this golden age of slashers, they play original trailers, relate the usually scathing reviews from famed party-poopers Siskel and Ebert, while also listing the other releases that came out that particular year.

Running through an entire film with a fine-tooth comb, the hosts stop to point out all the insane, awesome, and laughable moments – including spoilers (but for a 40-something-year-old movie, can you really take issue with that?). In the end, the pair determine whether or not their featured film holds up today, both in terms of craftsmanship, social issues, and – surprise – there's never a lack of discussion concerning the material's treatment of race, sexuality, and women's rights. An openly gay man and queer historian, David provides compelling insight into how themes of homosexuality and homophobia colour the story and its scares.

More than just another podcast featuring two dudes with opinions, *Bring Me the Axe!* showcases intelligent conversations about horror and society while embracing the dumber elements of the genre as well. One might even describe listening to the White brothers' podcast as settling down for a movie marathon with your smartest horror-loving friends, while getting housework done at the same time. Win-win!

JESSICA BUCK

stalking a decaying world as its central theme, so it's fitting that the album doles out endless death blows that combine the metallic hardcore grunt of Nails, Chepang's manic grindcore, and occasional, tastefully deployed beatdowns à la Bulldoze. Apparently Nic Cage himself is actually a fan – one wonders whether he'll draw inspiration from this singer's vein-splitting performance for a future acting gig, the same way he channelled Axl Rose and Dave Mustaine for *Mandy*? ☠☠☠ **AD**

TORSO

METAL

Annihilation Day

APF Records

Torso's *Annihilation Day* is a genre-bending feast for degenerate ears, merging styles and influences in a way that feels tailor-made to the horror-worshipping metalhead. We get everything from doom metal riffs that evoke the great Electric Wizard to synth lines that could have been plucked from a bleak horror gem like *Messiah of Evil*. There's thrash metal influence at work and the vocal stylings range from kinship with Uncle Acid to golden-age White Zombie. While each track possesses a great deal of variety and experimentation, there's enough similarity between them that one could argue something is lacking in terms of having a standout song. However, consumed as a singular unit, there's so much to lust over here, from the opening earworm bass line of "Show Your Face" to the Vangelis-worship synth intro of "Blast Furnace." If this is how Torso treats our day of annihilation, I'm salivating for what's in store when the sun finally sets. ☠☠☠☠ **DBG**

SADISTIC FORCE

METAL

Morbid Odyssey

(Independent)

The Texan miscreants that make up Sadistic Force let you know where things are at, even before you've heard a lick of the music: the sleeve features a long-haired ne'er-do-well, encrusted with spikes 'n' studs, enjoying bong hits from a human skull. Musically, things are just as subtle, with the band chewing its way through five tracks of prime, '80s-skewing heavy metal. The spirit of Motörhead's Lemmy Kilmister looms large, but along with the jet fuel-swigging riffs and general badassery you also get shards of choppy, Sodom-style thrash and elements that recall like-minded modern compatriots such as Midnight and Bewitcher. Thematically, it's like a shelf of video nasties set to song; the band gleefully diving into tales of witchery, serial murder, and satanic retribution while casually dropping in samples from *Horror Express* and *Blood Orgy of the She-Devils*. ☠☠☠☠ **AD**

ENDLESS DISMAL MOAN

METAL

Lord of Nightmare

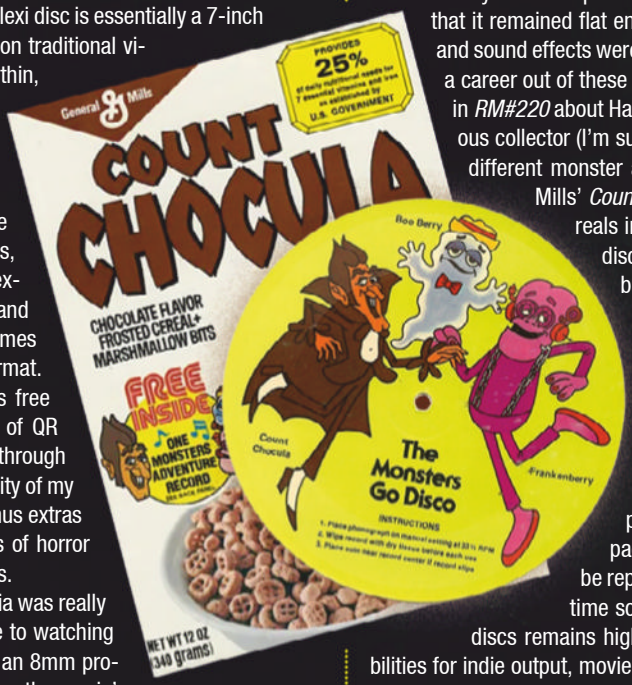
Hessian Firm

Endless Dismal Moan was a culter-than-cult black metal project from Osaka that existed from 2001 until the untimely passing of sole member Chaos 9 in 2008. This new reissue of his 2006 album *Lord of Nightmare* well and truly lives up to its name: a spiralling descent into madness that prizes sickening atmosphere over killer riffs (though there are a fair few of those, too). The blur of synth notes, jagged guitar parts, and wall-of-noise drum machine is oppressive but also strangely hypnotic, with Chaos 9's ravening vocals by turns scything through the chaos and becoming one with the crackling maelstrom. While black metal often fixates on chilly snowscapes and moonlit forests, *Lord of Nightmare* feels like a disturbingly urban affair – equal parts deranged nightclub noir and grainy tech horror à la turn-of-the-century titles such as *Pulse* and *The Ring*. ☠☠☠☠½ **AD**

THE ARCHAIC FRIGHTS OF THE FLEXI DISC

I'M AN ACADEMIC AT HEART, SO I KNOW THAT ANY WORTHY INQUIRY INTO THE HUMANITIES AND CULTURE BEGINS WITH A QUESTION. THIS PAST SPRING, I WAS ASKED ONE THAT STRUCK ME IN PARTICULAR: "What's a flexi disc?" When I realized this format was no longer part of common vernacular, it led me down a research rabbit hole that ultimately got me to explore the entire history of the flexi disc in horror audio. I learned a thing or two, so I thought I'd invite you along, this Halloween, for a little history lesson.

First off, to answer the question: a flexi disc is essentially a 7-inch EP, except instead of being pressed on traditional vinyl material, its grooves are on very thin, "floppy" plastic. So thin and floppy, in fact, that these playable flexis were commonly included in magazines and used as promotional giveaways. *Mad Magazine* would include parody song flexis in special issues, *National Geographic* would include flexis with audio recordings of whales, and computer magazines would sometimes include code recorded in audio format. And of course, bands used flexis as free song promos, long before the days of QR codes for digital downloads. Going through my own library, I found that the majority of my flexi disc collection is made up of bonus extras that came with deluxe vinyl reissues of horror soundtracks, punk, and metal albums.



Back in the '60s, before home media was really a thing, the closest folks could come to watching movies in their living room was with an 8mm projector, but that was just for the video – the movie's audio was a separate conundrum. Enter Americom, who was able to provide monster kids with a whopping ten minutes of Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee by selling 200 ft of 8mm film of titles such as *Horror of Dracula* and *Curse of Frankenstein*, with the audio coming courtesy of a floppy flexi. All you had to do was fire up your 8mm film projector and press play on your turntable at the same time (perhaps a joint effort with a horror-loving friend) so the movie and its audio would be in sync. Incidentally, a complete set like this goes for big bucks on eBay nowadays.

Flexis actually had a long relationship with cereal boxes, oddly enough, and Halloween brought new opportunities. The idea was that you would actually cut the square record out of the back of the box and hope that it remained flat enough to play. Many of these spooky stories and sound effects were from the likes of Wade Denning, who made a career out of these sorts of full-length records (see this column in *RM#220* about Halloween sound effects albums). For the serious collector (I'm sure you must be out there), there were three different monster adventure flexis in select boxes of General Mills' *Count Chocula*, *Frankenberry*, and *Boo Berry* cereals in 1979. In one story, the three monsters go disco dancing, win a contest, and Frankenberry becomes Franken-Boogie. The others were "Count Chocula Goes to Hollywood" and "Monster Adventures in Outer Space."

Unfortunately, the flexi doesn't have much to offer audio quality-wise: the material is so thin that the grooves don't hold up to frequent listens, and we don't recommend seeking them out if musical preservation is your thing. Plus, the minimal packaging means less artwork, so they won't be replacing deluxe LPs for serious collectors anytime soon. But the gimmick factor with these mini discs remains high, especially when you consider the possibilities for indie output, movie trailers, contests, and other cool promotion ideas. Hey, it's a more memorable way to hype something up than just another marketing email to clog up your inbox, right? Gazing into my equally obsolete crystal ball, I see big things for the flexi for the forward-thinking horror culture connoisseur.

PLAY DEAD

NOW PLAYING > THE NECROMANCER'S TALE, OCCLUDE

THE NECROMANCER'S TALE

PC, MacOS

PsychicSoftware, Spiderwinkle Games

Do you enjoy practicing black magic in graveyards in the dead of night? How about raising skeletal armies and investigating suspicious deaths? If that sounds like a dream job, then *The Necromancer's Tale*, a new turn-based RPG that's absolutely steeped in the dark stuff, has you covered.

After choosing the level of difficulty (story mode, balanced, or strategy mode) and playing through the interactive prologue, which introduces the game's lore and helps determine the character's skills and traits, players are unleashed on the 18th-century town of Marns. Arriving just days after your father's untimely passing, you must explore, get a job, uncover the community's shady secrets, and learn the dark arts, all while keeping your activities secret from the locals because all forms of witchcraft and necromancy are strictly forbidden.

The Necromancer's Tale excels in its dark storytelling. Yes, it's text-heavy, but it's all so well-written, atmospheric, and engaging that one hardly notices how long it takes for combat to make its way into the proceedings. And given the key game mechanic that sees players raise skeletons to command and fight alongside them, a turn-based system makes perfect sense. (Just remember to put weapons and armour on those shambling bone sacks first). In addition, combat areas are clearly marked, so there's no chance of accidentally stumbling into a fight unprepared.

Story progression is mostly linear, and conversations have repercussions. Say the wrong thing and trust can be lost with a person or party, limiting future options. Like other games of this ilk, saving often is crucial, in case you want to go back and try something a different way.

All that said, the best part of the game is its

feeling of authenticity; the spellbook must be painstakingly decoded and translated, ingredients tracked down (often by questioning locals or witches), rituals practiced and learned, but all this is done without needless grinding, so while some gamers may find parts of *The Necromancer's Tale* text-heavy and slow-moving, it never feels as if it's wasting your time, and that's a damned fine spell to cast.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

HEADSHOTS: BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN, ATMOSPHERIC STORY; PURPOSEFUL, MEANINGFUL GAMEPLAY
MISFIRES: POINT-AND-CLICK LOCATIONS FOR DOORS AND SPELLS CAN BE A BIT FINICKY

OCCLUDE

PC

Tributary Games, Pantaloon

Occlude is best described as "occult solitaire for the horror set" – a description it mostly lives up to, though the developers could have leaned even harder into the spooky stuff, adding it to more elements of the card game than just the wraparound story.

As in traditional *Solitaire*, this is a one-player affair. And while the mechanics differ slightly from that well-known card game, they are easy to pick up, especially if you partake in the tutorial. The horror aspects come largely from the stories behind the seven different rituals (a.k.a. games) that comprise *Occlude*; they see players wishing to challenge the Devil to undo murders they've committed or relationships they've destroyed. Each game offers three different narrative outcomes depending on how well – or poorly – you do at deciphering and meeting the ritual's requirement, which is accomplished by playing the right four cards last (one of each suit). The main challenge of *Occlude* is in figuring out how to identify these four cards in each ritual, as the rules are constantly changing, with only four mysterious coins added to the gameboard to provide clues. The difficulty level ramps up quite quickly and *Occlude* ultimately calls for expending a lot more brainpower than one might expect from a *Solitaire*-styled game.

Occlude offers a classic mode, featuring challenging gameplay as the devs intended, as well as an easier story mode, which allows for more than one level of undo if you're stuck on figuring out a certain ritual. Play through all seven games in either classic or story mode and reveal a narrative that loops right back to the sinister card game's creator.

Pull out *Occlude* on a dark and stormy night and see if you can change your fate. It all depends on how your play your cards, after all.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

HEADSHOTS: GOOD PREMISE, CLEVER WAY TO MAKE CLASSIC *SOLITAIRE* MORE CHALLENGING
MISFIRES: PRETTY SHORT OVERALL, MORE OCCULT/HORROR FLAVOUR COULD HAVE BEEN ADDED

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THE ARCHETYPAL FINAL GIRL IS AS EMBEDDED IN THE GENRE AS A MACHETE IN JASON VOORHEES' HOCKEY MASK. BUT IS IT PAST TIME TO LAY THAT TIRED TROPE TO REST? TWO OF OUR WRITERS ENTER THE RING TO BATTLE IT OUT!

HAS THE FINAL GIRL TROPE RUN ITS COURSE?

YES!

ADAM CLARKE

"Horror is at its best with team dynamics."

I'D LIKE TO MAKE A CASE ON BEHALF OF *RUE MORGUE* TO ENDORSE KILLING OFF THE FINAL GIRL TROPE FOR GOOD, VIRGINITY AND RESOURCEFULNESS BE damned. There are too many three-dimensional starring roles for women! They've had it too good for too long!

Yes, I'm being facetious; I don't want to throw the Final Girl baby out with the proverbial bathwater, but I have my reasons for wanting to shake up the slasher formula a little. If the horror movie is our partner in the intimate act of filmgoing, then a good climax is something we can all enjoy!

Simply put, horror is at its best with team dynamics seen in the likes of *Jason Lives!*, *Dream Warriors*, and *Prince of Darkness*. It's satisfying to see groups come together to rack their brains over a threat even if said brains get smashed in. Ellen Ripley is the Final Girl of *Alien*, but *Aliens* and *Alien 3* saw her reluctantly joining other characters to prevail (if prevail she did, but that's another debate). More characters to care about means more suspense... and maybe even a sex scene or two. It's win-win across the board!

There's no "i" in Team, but there are two in "Final Girl," which means everything you know about the term is wrong. It's not even accurate half the time we use it. Even Laurie Strode, The Definitive Final Girl, isn't really a Final Girl. The first two *Halloween*s see her merely wound the Shape both times before Loomis sweeps in to deal the killing (ish) blow.

Finally, adding Final Boys to the ranks of *Evil Dead*'s Ash, Jesse from *Freddy's Revenge*, and Sammie from *Sinners* doesn't just flip the gender script for our heroes, but our slashers and monsters too. Final Girls have been the polar opposite of our killers in terms of the kinds of masculinity on display; with Final Boys, we'd see more female slashers, witches, ghouls, and whatever Mary Lou Maloney was in that slept-on CanCon classic, *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II*.

And if our job as horror fans and creators is not to bring back Mary Lou Maloney, I don't know what we're doing here. Sorry, Final Girls!

VS

NO!

LOUIS FLETCHER

"If a trope or genre seems to have run out of steam, it's more likely a sign their exponents have run out of ideas."

I HATE TO GET ALL RANDY MEEKS ON YOUR ASS, BUT THE ABOVE PROPOSITION MISUNDERSTANDS THE VERY NATURE OF A TROPE. PLEASE INDULGE ME WHILE I have an aneurysm…

Like genre, knotweed, and Stephen King's Pennywise, tropes are mutable, malleable, and all but unkillable things. They are storytelling devices limited only by their wielder's imagination (after all, a "Final Girl" needn't always be technically final, nor a girl). Given this innate flexibility, if a trope or genre seems to have run out of steam, it's more likely a sign their exponents have run out of ideas. A poor workman blames their tools.

Certainly, judged on the basis of a certain kind of generic 1970s exploitation flick, one might reasonably conclude that the Final Girl was dead long before she was even codified by Carol J. Clover – a tired, exploitative cliché whose only virtue was familiarity. Conversely, witnessing *Halloween*, *Suspiria*, and *Alien* might reveal that some filmmakers making use of the figure had something to say, or at least a unique and interesting way of saying it.

Likewise, for every slew of straight-to-video '90s hackwork, there's a postmodern *Scream*, and among the avalanche of streaming-service content fillers there's a *Halloween* (2018), whose entire raison d'être is to pick up with its "Final Girl" 40 years after her first credits rolled.

Ultimately though, it doesn't matter whether we conclude the Final Girl is passé or not, because the fate of a trope can never be decided. Tropes aren't dreamt up by a cultural committee; they are merely the names we give to observed phenomena. The Final Girl was not invented, she's merely one of the many ciphers we naturally reach for when we tell one another stories, alongside the reluctant hero and lone avenger.

A trope may be problematic, or betray an unflattering aspect of ourselves, but you can't remove that which is embedded in human nature. I mean, the Church decided sex was best avoided centuries ago and last time I checked, sex hadn't taken any notice.

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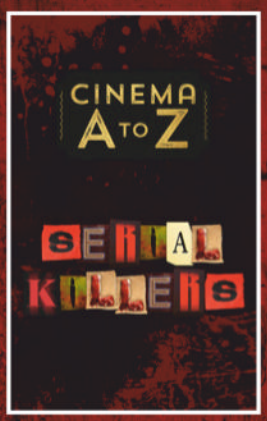

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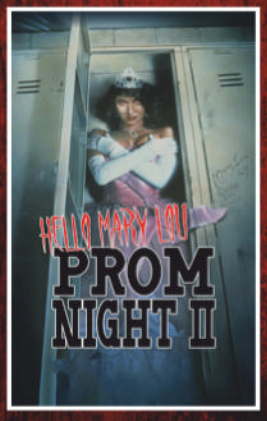

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